

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 24

The Gramscian Moment

Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism

Peter D. Thomas

BRILL

The Gramscian Moment

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The Gramscian Moment

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By

Peter D. Thomas



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For Sara

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A Note on the Text

I have consulted and benefited greatly from existing translations of Gramsci's works in English. However, due to my argument and the lack of a complete translation of the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* in English, I have often found it necessary to provide my own translation. References to Gramsci's prison writings follow the internationally established standard of notebook number, followed by number of note. Thus, Q 11, § 12 indicates Notebook 11, note 12. If possible, I have also provided page references to one of the English anthologies of Gramsci's writings. The English critical edition of *The Prison Notebooks*, edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg, now comprises three volumes, containing Notebooks 1–8; notes included in those volumes can also be located according to the notebook and number of note.

Due to frequency of citation, the following abbreviations are used: *Quaderni del carcere* (Q), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (SPN), *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (FSPN).

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Preface

The *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci are today acknowledged as a classic of twentieth-century social theory. Written under extremely difficult conditions in a Fascist prison cell in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they were only published in a thematic edition after the Second World War. A popular reception in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s promoted by the Italian Communist Party was followed by an international diffusion of Gramsci's thought from the 1960s onwards. The publication of the critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* in 1975, edited by Valentino Gerratana, was a landmark in Gramscian scholarship. It allowed for the first time a close textual analysis of the development of Gramsci's 'necessarily incomplete' carceral project. Gramsci's work now constitutes a significant point of reference in such diverse field as history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, international relations and political theory. This popularity and diffusion are all the more remarkable when the relative neglect into which other authors from the Marxist tradition have fallen in the same period is recalled. As Eric Hobsbawm has argued, Gramsci has today become a 'classic' not only of Marxism but also of the wider human and social sciences.¹

¹ Cf. Hobsbawm 1995.

Nevertheless, as Oscar Wilde might have remarked, reputation does not necessarily ensure recognition. Arguably, reference to Gramsci's name and to some of his key concepts—above all, that of hegemony—occurs more often than the close textual analysis and assessment of his thought. Despite the rich opportunities offered by Gerratana's critical edition, a philological reading of the *Prison Notebooks* began slowly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A combination of the legacy of political instrumentalisations, a changed political conjuncture and decline in the fortunes of Marxist theory as a scholarly research paradigm worked against attempts to reconstruct an integral picture of Gramsci's thought in the context of the history of Marxism. More recently, however, a new generation of researchers has begun to explore such paths untaken, insisting upon the necessity of contextualising Gramsci's research in the currents of his time. Perhaps even more significantly, the most recent season of Gramscian scholarship has attempted to follow the development of Gramsci's carceral project in its laborious elaboration, hesitations and necessary incompleteness, valorising the fertility of its dynamic for contemporary attempts to rethink the Marxist tradition.

This study proposes to make a contribution to the philological reassessment of Gramsci's legacy, in the perspective of the contemporary revitalisation of Marxism. Both of these elements should be emphasised from the outset, as the 'content' and 'horizon' of this study. On the one hand, I attempt to engage with the most advanced findings of Gramscian research, in the conviction that it is only by comprehending the meaning of Gramsci's carceral writings in their historical context that we will be in a position to understand its possible significance for our own times; indeed, as I shall argue, it is sometimes precisely the distance of Gramsci's thought from the 'main currents' of the present that make it all the more urgent to engage with the critical perspectives he provides us. On the other hand, this study consciously assumes a 'partisan' position in contemporary debates about the future of Marxism and Gramsci's relation to it. Gramsci's thought was continually nourished by critical engagement with the prior Marxist tradition, which he attempted to renew in a form adequate to the political tasks of his time; a productive reading of Gramsci today, in my view, must necessarily be conducted in a similar spirit of inheritance, transformation and revitalisation of Marxism as a 'conception of the world' integrated with the efforts of the subaltern classes to found a new 'civilisation'.

The point of departure for this study is constituted by the influential critiques of Gramsci by Louis Althusser's contribution to *Reading 'Capital'* and Perry Anderson's 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the distance of time, I argue that these readings remain representative of more general 'images of Gramsci' in both the Marxist and wider intellectual culture. Similarly, although these critiques seem to deal with different aspects of Gramsci's thought—respectively, the status of Marxist philosophy and the Marxist theory of the state—I argue that these interpretations are in many respects complementary, treating discretely themes that Gramsci's carceral research project attempted to unify. Taken in their unity, a critical analysis of the presuppositions of Althusser's and Anderson's interpretations leads us to the heart of Gramsci's proposal of the 'philosophy of praxis', conceived as both a critique of the relationship between philosophy hitherto and the forms of the modern state, on the one hand, and as a potential renewal of the philosophical tradition in relation to the institutions and practices of the modern working-class movement, on the other.

The 'Gramscian moment' indicated in the title of this book refers not only to the astounding *annus mirabilis* of 1932, in which Gramsci, deepening and articulating his interdisciplinary and multi-faceted research project, delineates the 'three component parts' of the 'philosophy of praxis' in the notions of an absolute 'historicism', absolute immanence and absolute humanism. It also refers to his integration in this year of his research into the nature of the modern state, on the one hand, and the social and political overdetermination of philosophy, on the other. The 'Gramscian moment' thus signals the transition from a conception of the state as a 'philosophical event' to the elaboration of a notion of hegemony as a 'philosophical fact'. The implications of this position, I argue, amount to a new way of conceiving both the political status of philosophy and the philosophical status of Marxism. Today, as a new generation of activists and researchers discover the richness of the various traditions that constitute Marxism in the broadest sense, the renewal of Marxism's 'Gramscian moment' constitutes an urgent theoretical and political task.

Chapter One, 'The Moment of *Reading "Capital"*', provides the rationale for the study. It outlines the terms of Althusser's famous and influential critique of Gramsci in *Reading 'Capital'* (1965). Following André Tosel, I argue that this represents the 'last great theoretical debate of Marxism' because it posed the question of the status of Marxist philosophy as central for the

further development of Marxism as both a *Weltanschauung* and scholarly research programme. I assess the varying seasons of Althusserianism and Gramscianism before analysing the different conceptions of the status of Marxist philosophy in Althusser's and Gramsci's texts at different stages of their development. I propose to refer to these conceptions as the Althusserian and Gramscian moments of Marxism, and argue that, while the Gramscian paradigm may currently seem to enjoy a form of 'weak' theoretical hegemony, Althusserian themes are more dominant in the decisive field of Marxist philosophical research.

Despite the widespread and continuing influence of Althusser's critique (even and especially when not acknowledged), there are at least three reasons why it should be reconsidered today. First, the absence of the critical edition led Althusser to misrepresent Gramsci's 'organic' concepts; the current state of Gramscian philology allows us to analyse with greater accuracy the emergence, development and significance of central concepts in the *Prison Notebooks* that were rejected by Althusser as inadequate for the elaboration of Marxist philosophy. Second, although Althusser progressively distanced himself from the presuppositions of the critique of Gramsci in his early work, and although he continued to engage with the political significance of Gramsci's legacy, he did not return to reconsider the philosophical dimensions of Gramsci's project in the light of his later perspectives. The late Althusser's 'philosophy of the encounter' provides an additional perspective from which to assess Gramsci's conception of the dialectical relationship between philosophy, politics and history. Third, the contemporary revival of Marxist theory, already witnessed in the renewal of debates concerning the state, imperialism, globalisation and the nature of capitalist crisis, provides an opportunity to reconsider the status of a Marxist philosophical research programme. The rhythm of development of the *Prison Notebooks*, I argue, contains a vision of Marxist philosophy, radically different from many previous and contemporary formulations, which may permit a new generation of Marxists to recommence the elaboration of Marx's legacy in a new philosophical form.

Chapter Two, 'Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci?', critically examines Perry Anderson's influential 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' of 1976. Although Anderson's critique won and continues to enjoy wide assent, I argue that it offers a problematic assessment of Gramsci's thought, when compared to the textual evidence of the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks*. Ander-

son argued that Gramsci's carceral researches were characterised by a series of ambiguities that gave rise to a progressive transformation and deformation of his theses, particularly those regarding the state and his central concept of hegemony. While presenting the main lines of Anderson's narrative, I suggest that there is enough textual evidence to call into doubt its main presuppositions and conclusions, thus necessitating a new reading of the development and significance of some of Gramsci's most famous formulations.

Chapter Three, "A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery inside an Enigma"? On the Literary Form of the *Prison Notebooks*, examines the formal and literary-critical presuppositions of Anderson's critique, taken to be representative of a more general received image of the *Prison Notebooks*. I argue that this interpretation depends upon four assertions that are not supported by the philological evidence available in the critical edition: first, it asserts that Gramsci's use of inherited language to formulate his qualitatively new concepts had 'overlaid and deflected' their distinctive meaning; second, it supposes that Gramsci's attempt 'to evade his jailers' through the use of cryptic language reduced the theoretical clarity of his researches; third, it posits a 'hidden order', a 'true' original text of Gramsci's thought; and fourth, it argues for a reconstruction of Gramsci's 'fragmentary' formulations. I propose alternative preliminary protocols that acknowledge both the formal and substantial distinctiveness of the *Prison Notebooks*, thus basing my reading upon philologically more secure foundations.

Chapters Four, Five and Six outline an alternative reading of the theoretical and historical context of Gramsci's thought. These chapters take account of the dominant received images of Gramsci and undertake a philological and historical-comparative analysis of their validity.

Chapter Four, 'Contra the Passive Revolution', delineates the development of Gramsci's critical theory of modernity. Against Anderson's assertion of Gramsci's slow descent towards 'Kautskyanism' and a reformist concept of the state, I argue that the development of the concepts of the 'integral state' and 'passive revolution' in the *Prison Notebooks*, coupled with Gramsci's insistence upon the centrality of praxis in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, issues in a deepened understanding of the complexity of revolutionary strategy in the Western capitalist social formations. This chapter emphasises the centrality of politics in Gramsci's analysis of the 'long nineteenth century'.

Chapters Five and Six analyse the central terms of the *Prison Notebooks*'

political theory, focusing in particular on Gramsci's central political concepts of hegemony, consent, coercion, civil society and state, East and West, and a differentiated concept of political power. Chapter Five, 'Civil and Political Hegemony', argues against the view that Gramsci saw the 'location' of hegemony in the consensual field of civil society, as opposed to the state, *locus* of coercion. Rather than an oppositional and exclusionary relationship between binary terms, I argue that Gramsci develops a dialectical conception of the overdetermined status of consent and coercion and of civil society and the state. This is presented as a critical inheritance of Hegel's theory of the modern state, following decisive elements of Marx's critique, in which 'political society' and 'civil society' appear as 'attributes' of the integral state. I argue that Gramsci's theory of hegemony gives rise to a Marxist theory of 'the constitution of the political', or of the transformation of social forces into forms of political power adequate to different class projects.

Chapter Six, 'The Realisation of Hegemony', takes issue with claims regarding the geopolitical coordinates of Gramsci's thought and the different forms of hegemony analysed in the *Prison Notebooks*. Here, I seek to interrogate critically readings that have emphasised a distinction between the 'East' and 'West' as central to Gramsci's political theory by reconstructing the history of this metaphor, particularly in the debates related to the Russian Revolution. I argue that the concept of the united front possesses a greater centrality in Gramsci's thought than has often been supposed. I then analyse claims that Gramsci's concept of hegemony results in a generic theory of social power, indifferently applicable to class projects of different natures. Emphasis upon the development of the concept of a 'hegemonic apparatus' in the *Prison Notebooks* leads me to argue that Gramsci formulates a theory of political power as immanent to class power. While many critics have related Gramsci's concept of hegemony to debates in prerevolutionary Russian Social Democracy, I argue that a close examination of Gramsci's arguments reveal that his fundamental point of reference was instead Lenin's emphasis upon hegemony as a complement of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the postrevolutionary conjuncture, conceived as a process of cultural revolution. I substantiate this thesis by examining alternative formulations of the NEP and the politics of the united front in the *Prison Notebooks*.

Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine provide a detailed reconstruction of the elaboration of the 'philosophy of praxis', viewed in terms of its 'three compo-

nent parts': absolute 'historicism', absolute immanence and absolute humanism. These chapters are concerned to delineate both the development of these central concepts of Gramsci's philosophical researches and to demonstrate their dialectical integration with Gramsci's theory of the integral state and the nature of proletarian hegemony.

Chapter Seven, 'The Philosophy of Praxis Is the Absolute "Historicism"', traces the emergence of the concept of 'absolute historicism' in Gramsci's conceptual vocabulary. Against Althusser's claim that the term indicates Gramsci's enduring indebtedness to Croce and to Hegel, I aim to demonstrate that the *Prison Notebooks* in fact subject Croce's 'absolute historicism' and 'reform' of Hegelianism to an ongoing and radical critique. At the same time, I emphasise the distance between Gramsci's comprehension of the nature of Marxist philosophy and the version proposed in the same period by Bukharin, later developed in the form of 'Diamat'. This chapter focuses in particular on Gramsci's conception of the relationship between ideology and philosophy, which provides an immanent critique both of Croce and of the early Althusser's conception of Marxist philosophy. The *Prison Notebooks'* progressive redefinition of the relationship between ideology and philosophy refutes at least four decisive elements of the critique of *Reading 'Capital'*: the non-contemporaneity of the present, the impossibility of an essential section, relations of translation between philosophy, history and politics, and the philosophy of praxis as the 'catharsis' of a determinate practical life. I further argue that Gramsci's emphasis upon the adjective in the phrase 'historical materialism' leads him to a radical critique of objectivist traditions in Marxism and a reformulation of the centrality of the concept of praxis.

Chapter Eight, 'The Absolute Secularisation and Earthliness of Thought', examines Gramsci's reading and development of Marx's notion of the *Diesseitigkeit* of thought. While Althusser asserted that Gramsci was uninterested in science, I demonstrate that the *Prison Notebooks* engage extensively with the development of modern science and valorise its contribution to the philosophy of praxis. I then examine Gramsci's integration of research in the fields of historical linguistics and the history of economic thought into his definition of a new concept of 'immanence' as theory. The relation of this concept of immanence to the Western philosophical tradition is examined, particularly in relation to recent interpretations opposed to notions of transcendence. I argue that the equation of immanence and theory presupposes and elaborates

a novel concept of 'coherence' as an historicist orientation that can increase the capacity to act of popular social classes. Set against the background of Gramsci's redefinition of the relationship between *senso comune* and philosophy, this gives rise to a critical notion of the production of the identity of theory and practice in the historical process.

Chapter Nine, 'An Absolute Humanism of History', aims to demonstrate the concluding moment of dialectical concretion of Gramsci's philosophical researches and their integration with his theory of the integral state and its potential overcoming in the hegemonic relations of an expansive working-class movement. Although Althusser claimed that Gramsci belonged to a tradition of 'revolutionary humanism', I argue that the *Prison Notebooks*' critique of objectivism also involves a rejection of philosophies of the subject. Instead, I suggest that Gramsci's emphasis upon an ensemble of historically determined social relations is related to an alternative tradition based upon the concept of the 'person'. I then analyse Gramsci's interpretation of the humanist tradition, particularly in relation to his analysis of the status of different types of intellectuals. The categories of 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectuals are related to the figure of the 'democratic philosopher'. This figure enables us to rethink the contemporary significance of Gramsci's proposal of the 'Modern Prince' and an apparatus of proletarian hegemony as the organisation of expansive democratic social relations. Furthermore, I suggest in conclusion that the organisation of hegemonic relations of human knowledge provides a potential new form in which to inherit and to elaborate the Western philosophical tradition. The philosophy of praxis thus appears as a refoundation of Marxism that simultaneously has the potential to renew 'from head to toe the whole way of conceiving of philosophy itself'.²

The concluding chapter, 'Marxism and Philosophy: Today', returns to consider the importance of a philosophical research programme as an integral element in the contemporary revitalisation of Marxism. Gramsci's redefinition of philosophy in terms of a 'conception of the world' is here valorised as the necessary precondition for grasping the full significance of the 'historical epoch' initiated by Marx. What is at stake here is not merely a philosophy *for* Marxism, but the ways in which the development of the Marxist tradition within the working-class movement permit the transformation of the form of phi-

² Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

losophy itself. Just as Gramsci argued that the development of autonomous forms of political practice is a necessary moment in a social class's emergence from subalternity, so the transformation of philosophy and the elaboration of an independent conception of the world figures as an ineludible moment in the forging of a class's coherence and capacity to act. With the proposal of an absolute historicism, absolute immanence and absolute humanism, the *Prison Notebooks* provide us with valuable resources and perspectives for the elaboration of such an independent research programme of Marxist philosophy, as an intervention on the *Kampfplatz* of contemporary philosophy. Ultimately, however, the renewal of the Gramscian moment today must be practised as a critical intervention into the process of the revitalisation of Marxism itself, as a self-reflexive and dynamic moment in the formation of a 'conception of the world' capable of vivifying a new and 'integral civilisation'.³

³ Ibid.

Chapter One

The Moment of Reading '*Capital*'

1.1. 'I can only think of Gramsci ...'

Who has *really* attempted to follow up the explorations of Marx and Engels? I can only think of Gramsci.¹

This remarkable recommendation was made by Louis Althusser regarding Gramsci's explorations of the 'theory of the specific effectivity of the superstructures' in one of the central essays of *For Marx*, 'Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation'.² Althusser saluted Gramsci's 'new' concept of hegemony as a 'remarkable example of a theoretical solution in outline to the problems of the interpenetration of the economic and the political'.³ *Reading 'Capital'*, published in the same year (1965), initially seemed to continue to speak of Gramsci with the highest praise. Althusser credited Gramsci with providing one of the most coherent formulations of a tradition of 'revolutionary humanism and historicism' that emerged from the experience of World War I and the Russian Revolution, including Luxemburg, Mehring, Korsch and Lukács;⁴ he

¹ Althusser 1969, p. 114.

² Althusser 1969, p. 113.

³ Althusser 1969, p. 114.

⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 120.

acknowledged that this tradition ‘was born out of a vital reaction against the mechanism and economism of the Second International’;⁵ he praised the ‘enormously delicate and subtle work of genius’ of Gramsci, and in particular, his ‘fruitful discoveries in the field of *historical materialism*’.⁶

However, it quickly became clear that Althusser had come not to praise Gramsci, but to bury him. Despite having profound misgivings and fears of being misunderstood, Althusser proceeded to announce his intention to formulate certain ‘theoretical reservations’ with respect to what he described as Gramsci’s ‘interpretation of *dialectical materialism*’.⁷ Such reservations, as André Tosel has noted, were ‘total’.⁸ Conserving the ‘the formal structure of Marxism-Leninism’—and, in particular, the division of Marxism into historical materialism and dialectical materialism—Althusser ‘mercilessly criticised the philosophical historicism of Gramsci’.⁹ A close analysis of not merely Gramsci’s ‘words’ but his ‘“organic” concepts’,¹⁰ Althusser argued, revealed the ‘latent logic’ of a humanist and historicist problematic (now expanded to include ‘usually a generous or skilful but “rightist” misappropriation’ of the original post-World-War I revolutionary leftism that re-emerged after 1956, encompassing the work of Sartre, Della Volpe and Colletti, among others).¹¹ It threatened the very foundations of Marxism’s theoretical and political coherence.

Althusser’s critique focused upon an interpretation of one of the most famous passages of the *Prison Notebooks*. Here, Gramsci attempted to make his own distinctive contribution to the debates in the late 1920s about Marxist orthodoxy. These debates eventually issued in the consecration of the new (state-enforced) orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism, without hearing Gramsci’s submission. Gramsci argued that

there is no doubt that Hegelianism is (relatively speaking) the most important of the motivations for philosophising of our author; also and particularly because it attempted to go beyond the traditional conceptions of idealism and materialism in a new synthesis which undoubtedly had a quite excep-

⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.

⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Tosel 1995a, p. 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

¹¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

tional importance and which represents a world-historical moment of philosophical research. So when the *Manual* says that the term 'immanence' in the philosophy of praxis is used in a metaphorical sense, it is saying nothing. In reality the term immanence has here acquired a special meaning which is not that of the 'pantheists' nor any other metaphysical meaning but one which is new and needs to be specified. It has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression one should put the accent on the first term—'historical'—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is the absolute 'historicism', the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.¹²

Althusser distinguished between an initial critical and polemical meaning of the terms 'absolute historicism' and 'absolute humanism'—understood as merely echoes of Gramsci's famous article greeting the October Revolution, 'The Revolution against *Capital*',¹³ 'the old protest against the bookish phariseism of the Second International'—and a '*theoretical interpretation*' affecting the very content of Marx's thought.¹⁴ He objected that Gramsci's placement of the accent upon the adjective in the term 'historical materialism' led him to undervalue the 'resolutely *materialist* character of Marx's conception',¹⁵ and thus to neglect the crucial distinction between historical materialism (defined by Althusser as 'the scientific theory of history') and dialectical materialism ('Marxist philosophy').¹⁶

In its turn, this led Gramsci, 'constantly haunted by Croce's theory of religion', to flatten out the distinction between Marxism and other "'conceptions of the world'" and "'ideologies'".¹⁷ 'What distinguishes Marxism from these ideological "conceptions of the world"', Althusser argued, 'is less the (important) formal difference that Marxism puts an end to any supraterrrestrial "beyond", than the distinctive form of this absolute immanence (its "earthliness")': *the form of scientificity*'.¹⁸ Such scientificity had been constituted by an

¹² Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 465.

¹³ Cf. Gramsci 1977, pp. 34–7.

¹⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 130.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

epistemological rupture with a previous ideological problematic. It resulted in a qualitatively new science (historical materialism), which in turn called for the elaboration of a qualitatively new philosophy (dialectical materialism) capable of defending the scientific from the (ever-present) threat of the return of the (superannuated but still effective) ideological.

Gramsci, having failed to acknowledge this distinction, and having furthermore reduced science to a mere 'superstructure or a historical category' which 'ultimately [reduced] science to history as its "essence"',¹⁹ could not do more than think the 'relationship between Marxist scientific theory and real history according to the model of a relationship of *direct expression*'.²⁰ Marxist theory was thus unable to be distinguished from the history from which it organically emerged.²¹ The specificity of Marxism—its unique triangular articulation of politics, philosophy and science—was annulled. 'The theory of history' was collapsed into 'real history', 'the object of knowledge' was confused with 'the real object', and dialectical materialism disappeared into historical materialism.²²

Much more dangerously, 'the project of thinking Marxism as an (absolute) historicism automatically unleashes a logically necessary chain reaction which tends to reduce and flatten out the Marxist totality into a variation of the Hegelian totality'.²³ Indeed, this was the central contention of Althusser's critique: what made Gramsci's 'historicism *absolute*', according to Althusser, was the fact that the moment of 'Absolute Knowledge' of the Hegelian system was 'itself historicized'.²⁴ The privileged moment of transparency reserved by Hegel for an indeterminate future moment was thus surreptitiously transferred to all possible presents, each of which possessed the "'essential section" of contemporaneity'.²⁵ The distortion and dislocation proper to the Marxist totality, 'the different levels or instances which do not directly express one another'²⁶ (overdetermination of diverse, relatively autonomous elements), became unthinkable. Philosophy and science (but, Althusser declared, Gram-

¹⁹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 133.

²⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

²¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 132.

²² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 137.

²³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 132.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

sci was 'little concerned with science')²⁷ could thus only be an empiricist reading of an essence, or, as Althusser argued, adopting a phrase that Gramsci had appropriated from Croce, transformed, and deployed in his critique of Bukharin, 'a historical methodology'.²⁸

The foundation of this confusion, according to Althusser, was an ideological concept of praxis whose generality permitted it to subsume all social practices, as a genus to their species.

Theoretical practice tends to lose all specificity and to be reduced to historical practice in general, a category which is made to include forms of production as different as economic practice, political practice, ideological practice and scientific practice.²⁹

This conceptual slide was permitted by an implicit assertion that 'historical practice and theoretical practice have one and the same structure'.³⁰ The former took precedence over the latter and in fact constituted its 'secret' (in a Feuerbachian sense), the ground from which it emerged and its ever-present truth. In a latter-day reversal of the Platonic condemnation of the poets, the overly general Gramscian concept of praxis thus implicitly reduced philosophy to a mere imitation of such 'essential [historical] structures'³¹—in fact, one essential structure that manifested itself in multiple phenomenal forms—which preceded and determined it. Marxist theory, rather than being a scientific analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the political preconditions necessary to abolish it, was reduced to a mimetic imitation of the all too real imperfections of the (present) Real. It could thus offer no perspective for seeing beyond it. It became a mere form of self-consciousness of the present that could make no claims to being qualitatively distinct from other forms of self-consciousness or, indeed, objectively superior to them.

²⁷ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 134.

²⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 137; cf. *Q* 11, §14; *SPN*, p. 436.

²⁹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 134.

³⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 135.

³¹ *Ibid.*

A necessary consequence of this concept of praxis was Gramsci's equation, 'in the last instance',³² of the philosopher and the politician. This tended in its turn to downgrade the role of philosophers—in particular, the distinct contribution that Marxist philosophers could make to the elaboration and refinement of Marxist theory after Marx, and its correct deployment in the concrete conjuncture. For Gramsci,

philosophy is the direct product (assuming all the 'necessary mediations') of the activity and experience of the masses, of politico-economic praxis: professional philosophers merely lend their voices and the forms of their discourse to this 'common sense' philosophy, which is already complete without them and speaks in historical praxis—they cannot change it substantially.³³

The philosopher continued to have a privileged (but only retrospective) access to the Real of history, but only at the cost, Althusser seemed to suggest, of remaining entrapped within the penultimate phrase of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: interpretation and not change remained the philosopher's only conceivable task.

One final revelation remained in store. Althusser paused before calmly delivering his unexpected conclusion. 'Despite his enormous historical and political genius',³⁴ Gramsci's traversal of a humanist-historicist problematic in full flight from the stultifying determinism of Second International orthodoxy had, it seemed, been no more, and perhaps much less, than a *Holzweg*. According to Althusser, Gramsci's absolute historicism resulted in a 'relapse'

into the ideological concept of history, the category of temporal presence and continuity; into the politico-economic practice of real history, by flattening the sciences, philosophy and ideologies into the unity of the relations and forces of production, i.e., in fact, into the infrastructure. Paradoxical as this conclusion may seem—and I shall doubtless be attacked for expressing it—it must be drawn: from the standpoint of its *theoretical problematic*, and not of its political style and aims, this humanist and historicist materialism has rediscovered the basic theoretical principles of the Second International's economistic and mechanistic interpretation.³⁵

³² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 134.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 138.

1.2. Reading 'Capital' in its moment

Ambitious in its aims, rigorous in its argumentation, audacious in its conclusions, Althusser's critique produced immediate effects in the intellectual milieux of Western Europe's two largest Communist Parties during the 1960s and 1970s. More significantly, it prompted theoretical debates that extended far beyond them. In Italy, Althusser's critique connected with debates regarding not merely Gramsci but Marxism itself that had been underway for at least a decade. A combination of national and international conjunctures (a widespread questioning of Crocean historicism in the context of post-Fascist reconstruction of the Italian state, and a partial opening of the space available for theoretical debate in the international Communist movement following 1956) had led to a discussion of the validity of Gramsci's historicism. This discussion focused in particular on the 'official' Togliattian interpretation of Gramsci's thought, indissolubly linked to theses regarding the historical responsibilities of the Italian Communist party in the postwar period. It was opposed by a series of new theoretical initiatives in Italian Marxism that subjected the PCI to critique from 'the Left'. Mario Tronti, at the origins of what became known as *operaismo*, had already expressed in 1958 many of the same doubts as Althusser regarding key tenets of Gramsci's thought, though in more diplomatically modulated terms.³⁶ Above all, it was the Della Volpean school's emphasis upon Marxism as a science that gave rise to a wide-ranging debate, particularly following the publication of Nicola Badaloni's *Marxismo come storicismo* in 1962.³⁷ Reading 'Capital' both echoed and intensified the anti-historicist positions from these debates. In a certain sense, it 'internationalised' a certain reading of Gramsci (which had by no means been hegemonic in either the PCI or the wider culture of the Italian Left), and explicated the political-theoretical consequences of this reading, arguably more clearly than had been possible within overdetermined manoeuvres on the 'Italian road to socialism'.

In France, Althusser's critique initiated what Paolo Pulina has described as a 'Gramsci Renaissance'.³⁸ It became a fundamental point of reference for a series of studies that sought to revalue the theoretical and political import

³⁶ Cf. Tronti 1958. Althusser read and would seem to have been influenced by Tronti's critique. Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 120.

³⁷ Badaloni 1962; cf. Liguori 1996, pp. 132–52.

³⁸ Cited in Tosel 1995b, p. 55.

of Gramsci's thought, most notably by Buci-Glucksmann.³⁹ More generally, the anti-historicist and anti-humanist perspectives Althusser had brought into sharper focus through his critique of Gramsci became formative for an entire generation. Beginning with his one-time student collaborators on the collective project of *Reading 'Capital'*, this influence extended far beyond what can only loosely be described as the 'Althusserian school' to include many of the major emerging intellectual figures of those years (even and especially those who subsequently disavowed the names with which this theoretical father had been inextricably associated). Such was the richness and variety of theoretical production that followed upon Althusser's initial intervention that one could suggest that it was the paradigm of *Gramsci ou Althusser* that defined the horizon of the French intellectual avant-garde, at least for a season decisive to its formation, to a much greater extent than the paradigms (structuralism, poststructuralism) which have subsequently been canonised by the 'official' histories of those years.⁴⁰

1.3. 'The last great theoretical debate of Marxism'

Nevertheless, the enduring significance of Althusser's critique is correctly located within the wider Marxist tradition and is not to be limited to the conjunctural forms it assumed in any national culture or party apparatus, whatever their importance or international influence. As André Tsel has noted,

there is need to pause for a moment and consider this debate, the last great theoretical debate of Marxism, because it delineates the opposition of two types or poles of Marxism in the Twentieth century.⁴¹

Indeed, the positions that emerged from Althusser's critique, and those he ascribed to Gramsci, constituted two distinct paradigms that continue to be important points of reference for contemporary Marxist theoretical research,

³⁹ Buci-Glucksmann 1980.

⁴⁰ The motto refers, of course, to Pierre Macherey's fundamental study of 1979, *Hegel ou Spinoza*, perhaps one of the most philosophically sophisticated statement to have emerged, belatedly, from the Althusserian moment.

⁴¹ Tsel 1995a, p. 9.

above and beyond the fields of either Althusserian or Gramscian scholarship. The juxtaposition of 'structure versus agency' so popular in anglophone cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s does not adequately convey the full range of variations and contradictions which unite and divide these paradigms. In its abruptness, however, it does capture something of the 'structures of feeling' (to use a concept of Raymond Williams) that found their theoretical formulation in the terms of this debate.⁴²

1.3.1. Althusserianism

Althusser's critique of Gramsci's philosophy of praxis was a central polemical moment in which many of the features that only later came to be known as 'Althusserianism' were first systematically articulated. The critique of the Gramscian notion of 'conceptions of the world' led Althusser to the formulation of the famous science/ideology distinction, his 'historicised' version of the Platonic opposition of *dóxa* and *epistémé*. Gramsci's equation of philosophy and history provided Althusser with the opportunity to elaborate the Spinozan distinction between *idea* and *ideatum* into his categories of the 'object of knowledge' and the 'real object',⁴³ in its turn differentiated into 'the theory of history' and 'real history'.⁴⁴ Althusser's distinctive notion of the Marxist whole, a decentred structure of structures in dominance containing relatively autonomous elements, each with their own differential times, internal processes of validation, and overdetermined by a causality of a 'structural' rather than 'transitive' or 'expressivist' pedigree, emerged from his critique of the Hegelian totality that, he claimed, resulted from Gramsci's historicisation of the Hegelian moment of 'Absolute Knowledge'. Althusserianism's famous (or notorious) rigorously theoretical anti-humanism and rejection of

⁴² The classic statement of the influential 'structure versus agency' (or culture, as it was often called) debate is found in Hall 1980.

⁴³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 107 et sqq.

⁴⁴ The proposition was central to the epistemology of the early Althusser's project. 'We must have no illusions as to the incredible power of this prejudice, which still dominates us all, which is the basis for contemporary historicism and which would have us confuse the object of knowledge with the real object by attributing to the object of knowledge the same "qualities" as the real object of which it is the knowledge. The knowledge of history is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet.' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 106.)

any philosophy of self-consciousness took on a sharper focus in the critique of Gramsci's depiction of the philosophy of praxis as an inheritance and transformation of the humanist project.

The 'moment of Althusser' is, of course, now long past, abandoned first and most radically by its progenitor.⁴⁵ In its moment, however, 'classical' Althusserianism exerted a profound influence of renewal and regeneration of Marxist theory. It produced effects in diverse national cultures and a wide range of academic disciplines (to say nothing of the complicated political role it played in attempts at de-Stalinisation within the Communist Parties). As Gregory Elliott noted in his seminal study of 1987, the impact of Althusserian in France was immense.

From philosophy to political science, from historiography to literary criticism, linguistics and cultural studies, from economics to anthropology, from social theory to legal studies, the harvest of Althusserianism in 'abstract' and 'concrete' investigations, and in syntheses of the two, has been abundant and rich.⁴⁶

Althusserian perspectives and methodology, as well as some of Althusser's former students and collaborators (Balibar, Macherey et al.), made a significant contribution to the *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme* of 1982. This monumental work is perhaps not unfairly described as the 'owl of Minerva' of the renaissance of Marxist theory in France in the 1960s, appearing in the post- and anti-Marxist dusk of the early 1980s to survey the labours of the fading day. Internationally, the influence of Althusserianism has been similarly impressive and perhaps even more enduring. This is particularly the case in the anglophone academy, due to the canonisation of a certain Althusser as an intellectual ancestor of contemporary interdisciplinary 'Theory'. If we are not 'all Althusserians now', as Elliott also acknowledged,⁴⁷ there has nevertheless entered into the

⁴⁵ Althusser soon turned against the theses staked out in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*, exploring themes not entirely incompatible with those first explored by Gramsci. In his later 'aleatory materialism' or, perhaps more accurately, 'philosophy of the encounter', he ultimately arrives at positions that bear an uncanny resemblance to those which *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'* had unilaterally rejected. While this 'return of the repressed' is not explored systematically in the following study, it does provide one of its rationales.

⁴⁶ Elliott 2006, p. 308.

⁴⁷ Elliott 2006, p. 316.

general Marxist culture what could be described as a form of 'soft' Althusserianism—a suspicion of teleology, an attentiveness to the social and political processes of subject- and subjectivity-formation, a respect for the relative autonomy of diverse instances within the social totality.

1.3.2. Gramscianism

On the other hand, the positions which Althusser's critique argued were present in Gramsci's thought have been defining elements of an alternative paradigm of Marxist (and increasingly, *marxisant* or even post-Marxist) theoretical research. Among these we could note the following: an almost voluntarist valorisation of human agency; the denial of a qualitative distinction between conceptions of the world, ideologies and philosophies and thus a concomitant rejection of 'scientist' or 'deterministic' versions of Marxism; a focus upon the importance of culture understood in the broadest sense; the study of subalternity; and research into the 'microphysics' of social and political power. The influence of this paradigm extended far beyond the theoretical reflection of Eurocommunism in the form of a 'soft' Gramscianism, perhaps most famously embodied for anglophone Marxism by Laclau's and Mouffe's project of a post-Marxist radical-democratic politics.⁴⁸ No less productive than the Althusserian, this paradigm gradually established itself in a broad range of academic disciplines, from cultural studies, subaltern and postcolonial studies, anthropology, sociology, political theory and international relations, in many of which it continues to play an important role.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Mouffe explicitly formulated the shift to such 'Gramscism' in the 1970s as a response to the dwindling fortunes of Althusserianism in the same period. 'If the history of Marxist theory during the 1960s can be characterised by the reign of "Althusserianism", then we have now, without a doubt, entered a new phase: that of "Gramscism"' (Mouffe 1979, p. 1). Mouffe's collaboration with Laclau that produced *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985) combined elements from both Althusserian and Gramscian paradigms, with the accent falling upon a particular interpretation of the latter. For a penetrating yet balanced critique of this contested work, cf. Badaloni 1988. Laclau's and Mouffe's intervention was decisive for establishing a 'post-Marxist' image of Gramsci, centred on a 'discursive' concept of hegemony, which remains influential to this day—despite the fact that *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* contains only three, decontextualised references to the critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 89).

⁴⁹ For an overview of these currents, cf. Forgacs 1989. Cf. also Harris 1992.

Always less strictly defined in terms of doctrine than Althusserianism, the explicit Gramscianism of the 1970s and 80s finished not with a bang but a whimper, more domesticated into the footnotes than relegated to the dustbin of history. As Buttigieg notes,

the widespread presence of Gramsci in anglophone countries is evidenced not only by the large number of printed books and essays dealing with various aspects of his thought but also by the manner in which his influence cuts across all the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.⁵⁰

In this regard, Gramscian ‘agency’ has enjoyed a very different fate from that of Althusserian ‘structure’. While the latter was, for a long period, almost anathema for the reigning academic research programmes, the former became something of a shibboleth for left-wing theory. Arguably, Gramsci suffered the backhanded compliment accorded to every classic: more often referenced than actually read, his very ubiquity ensured a lack of in-depth research.⁵¹ The central themes of such Gramscianism have since been dissolved into the general Marxist and Marxist-inspired theoretical culture to such an extent that it is perhaps not incorrect to argue that today it is this paradigm, and not the Althusserian, which enjoys a certain weak form of theoretical hegemony.

1.4. Marxist philosophy

There is one field of research, however, in which history has not seen fit to disregard Althusser’s critique as itself merely a *Holzweg*, vindicating Gramsci against his posthumous repudiation: Marxist philosophy. This was precisely the field in which Althusser argued Gramsci’s greatest weaknesses were to be found. Regardless of whatever prestige the Gramscian paradigm enjoys in general, we must therefore concede that the Althusserian initiative achieved its primary objectives. Its success can be measured not so much in terms of the continuing authority of specific ‘classical’ Althusserian theses (many of which

⁵⁰ Buttigieg 1992, p. xiii.

⁵¹ Referring to Gramsci, Michel Foucault made the following acute observation in a private letter to Buttigieg (20 April 1984): ‘c’est un auteur plus souvent cité que réellement connu’ (Buttigieg 1992, p. xix).

were soon amended, substantially modified or even abandoned by Althusser himself). Rather, it can be viewed in a widespread acceptance of Althusser's characterisation and assessment of Gramsci's position and its concomitant marginalisation in contemporary philosophical debates. In other words, Althusser's proffered alternative perspectives regarding the philosophical status of Marxism and the status of philosophy within Marxism may have failed to win consent: few today, for example, would endorse fully the extreme rationalism of *Reading 'Capital'* and its unproblematic valorisation of Marxism as science, or feel comfortable in the age of the 'return of the subject' with the extent of its theoretical anti-humanism. At the same time, however, the responses to these questions that Althusser ascribed to Gramsci similarly fail to resonate with contemporary concerns: even fewer would contest that Gramsci is indeed an 'historicist' and a 'humanist' in the sense in which Althusser deployed these terms, or that he posits an 'expressivist' version of the social totality consonant with a certain type of Hegelianism. Significant dimensions of much recent Marxist philosophical research in a number of the most significant European national Marxist cultures have been determined by themes emerging from the Althusserian rather than Gramscian paradigm.⁵² This negative victory owes at least as much to Gramsci's disqualification from the outset through the successful imposition of the general outlines of Althusser's reading as it does to the fertility of those themes *an sich*.

Nowhere is this more the case than in anglophone Marxism, where the reception and influence of Gramsci has been predominantly in non-philosophical fields of research. Althusser's division of Gramsci's legacy into

⁵² The list of contemporary French Marxist, post-Marxist or *marxisant* philosophers reads like a 'Who's Who' of Althusser's students or of those strongly influenced by his work. Balibar, Macherey, Badiou, Rancière, Sève, Tosel and Bidet all passed through phases of close involvement with Althusser, leaving traces in their present work, whatever their other influences or subsequent evolution. Negri, though coming from a very different intellectual and political tradition, has productively engaged with Althusserian themes since his first exile in France, due in part to Althusser's personal generosity in arranging institutional affiliation for him in this period. Further afield, Žižek has repeatedly demonstrated his indebtedness to central Althusserian categories, particularly those closely affiliated with Žižek's Lacanian formation. In Italy, the scholars gathered around the Associazione Louis Althusser, such as Maria Turchetto and Vittorio Morfino, have produced a number of significant interventions. Marxist philosophical research in Germany has witnessed more Gramscian production, particularly in the work of Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Jan Rehmann and others associated with the Projekt Ideologietheorie; significantly, however, this current has also engaged extensively with Althusserian themes.

an admirable contribution to historical materialism and a weaker comprehension of the tasks of Marxist philosophy could well be taken as a succinct summary of Gramsci's presence in contemporary anglophone Marxist theory. The researches in the domain of historical materialism praised by Althusser have been profitably 'translated' into our own *senso comune*. Gramsci's proposals for a redefinition of philosophy within Marxism, however, have enjoyed less success. Although 'the philosophy of praxis' and related phrases have entered into the standard lexicon of anglophone Marxism (though often with emphases other than Gramsci's), and despite the numerous important specialist studies offering different interpretations of the meaning and significance of philosophy in Gramsci's thought,⁵³ he has not, on the whole, loomed strongly in the philosophical consciousness of recent research projects.

This is amply evidenced, in a positive register, by the figures and tendencies that have functioned as points of reference or inspiration for new philosophical initiatives in anglophone Marxism. For example, a series of important interventions by such figures as Elliott, Goshgarian, Levine and Montag explicitly take Althusser as their point of departure for rethinking the philosophical potential of the Marxist tradition.⁵⁴ Similarly, the exploration of various legacies of the Frankfurt school has constituted an important tendency, as have re-readings of Hegel, philosophical engagements with value theory and Marxist influences upon critical realism.⁵⁵ Most significant for anglophone Marxist philosophy in the preceding period, although arguably now exhausted, was, of course, the moment of analytical Marxism.⁵⁶ Despite the possibility for productive engagement between these research projects and Gramscian themes, dialogue has been more the exception than the rule. Thus in a negative register, the twice-over posthumous victory of Althusser on the question of Marxism and philosophy is attested to by the symptomatic absence of an extended consideration of Gramsci from most serious, recent discussions of Marxist philosophy.⁵⁷

⁵³ Cf. e.g. Nemeth 1980, Fontana 1993, Finocchiaro 1988.

⁵⁴ Elliott 2006, Goshgarian 2003 and 2006, Levine 2003, Montag 2002. cf. also Callari and Ruccio (eds.) 1996.

⁵⁵ Cf. e.g. Osborne 2001, Arthur 2004, Bhaskar 1993.

⁵⁶ The founding text was Cohen 2000. For an overview of this school's development, cf. Edwards 2007.

⁵⁷ Callinicos 1983, balancing between Althusserian and Gramscian moments, represents an exception that proves the rule.

This absence is even more notable and symptomatic when the previously discussed ubiquitous presence of Gramsci in almost all of the humanities and social sciences is kept in mind.

Such a neglect of Gramsci's philosophical legacy in the linguistic zone that is arguably now the centre of international Marxist debates becomes even more significant if we return once again to the terms of Tosel's analysis of this encounter.⁵⁸ For Gramsci's and Althusser's different conceptions of Marxism's relation to philosophy, and the role philosophy could play in its continuing development, were in fact the reasons that he nominated them as representative of 'two types or poles of Marxism in the twentieth century'.⁵⁹ Both Gramsci and Althusser, each in his own way, affirmed the continuing importance of philosophy for Marxism. They thus set themselves outside and against those currents that had presumed the question to be settled by Engels's erroneous editorial addition of a conjunction in the closing phrase of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. As we have seen, though, they disagreed sharply about the precise way in which philosophy should be integrated with the political aspirations of the working-class movement.

1.4.1. A new philosophy of praxis

Tosel argued that Gramsci aimed 'to determine any thought by means of the intrinsic recognition of its historical conditions of realisation, of its political constitution [*politicità*], thus following Marx, who had thought the relationship

⁵⁸ If Perry Anderson's prediction in 1983 regarding the migration of Marxism from its continental homelands to the transatlantic world has not proved to be entirely correct (significant Marxist theoretical cultures continue to flourish across continental Europe), the main lines of this thesis have been confirmed. Anglophone Marxism now occupies a dominant position that is arguably analogous to the role played in previous periods by German and Russian (and to a lesser extent, in the 1960s, French) Marxisms: namely, although significant theoretical projects originate in other languages, translation into the *lingua franca* is usually the precondition for their internationalisation and subsequent reception in other, national-linguistic Marxist cultures. Hardt's and Negri's *Empire* is perhaps the most striking example of this: a work co-authored by one of the major figures of postwar Italian Marxism, originally written in English, it was only translated into Italian following the onset of the international debate. Taking account of this centrality, one of the secondary purposes of the present study is therefore to urge a reconsideration of Gramsci's philosophical theses within anglophone Marxism and therefore the international debate.

⁵⁹ Tosel 1995a, p. 9.

between political economy and his critique in this way'.⁶⁰ In this conception, the philosophy of praxis was placed

in connection with *senso comune*, beginning with its elements pregnant with a new conception of the world. It aims at an intellectual and moral reform of *senso comune*, thus allowing the subaltern masses to exit from their passivity, to construct a new experience of the world and to become 'actors'.⁶¹

In short, philosophy—or more precisely, the prior philosophical tradition—was sublated [*aufgehoben*] by the new *Weltanschauung*, in the fullest Hegelian sense: that is, neither simply continued nor entirely negated, but transformed,

⁶⁰ Tosel 1995a, p. 11.

⁶¹ Ibid. The term *senso comune* [literally: common sense] is one of the most difficult terms in Gramsci's vocabulary to translate into English. The editors and translators of *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, noted that *senso comune* is 'used by Gramsci to mean the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become "common" in any given epoch. (Correspondingly he uses the phrase "good sense" to mean the practical, but not necessarily rational or scientific attitude that in English is usually called common sense)' (SPN, p. 322). Throughout this study, I have used the Italian term, unless the English is included in quotations from other writers. My reasons for this terminological decision (admittedly, not sanctioned by any of the existing English translations cf. SPN, FSPN, and Buttigieg's critical edition) are the following: first, as Hoare and Nowell-Smith already discerned, there is no clear correspondence between the Italian and English terms. Whereas 'common sense' can include pejorative connotations, its usual meaning in English is a certain agility and capacity to act successfully in individual terms, once a subject has understood the 'rules of the game' of their given culture; *senso comune* in Italian, on the other hand, in both Gramsci's time and today, places a much stronger emphasis upon those elements that are 'common' i.e. a subject's integration into an existing system of cultural reference and meaning, tending to devalorise processes of individuation and often with a negative connotation. This discrepancy between linguistic registers and cultural systems could admittedly be overcome, as it has in the past, through the addition of a note indicating the specificity of the concept for Gramsci while continuing to deploy the established English translation. My second reason for proposing the retention of the Italian term, however, is based upon the conceptually unsatisfying nature of this solution. *Senso comune* progressively assumes in the *Prison Notebooks* the status of a central philosophical concept, which Gramsci uses in order to redefine the nature of philosophy itself. As we will see, this represents a radical renovation of and challenge to the Western philosophical tradition's understanding of its 'relative' autonomy. In order to emphasise in this study the importance of Gramsci's addition to our philosophical vocabulary, it seems appropriate to use the original Italian term, to designate a genuinely new concept (in the same way in which the central concepts of other non-anglophone philosophers have sometimes been subsumed, partially or completely, into the anglophone philosophical vocabulary, either through use of the original term without translation, renovation of an existing English philosophical term, or coinage of a neologism e.g. Derrida's *différance*, Hegel's 'sublation [*Aufhebung*]', or Heidegger's 'thrownness [*Geworfenheit*]').

or 'translated', into an historical and political register. The word 'philosophy' remained, but the *form* of philosophy had undergone a sea-change; 'annihilated', in Engels's phrase, 'through criticism'.⁶²

1.4.2. A new practice of philosophy

For the Althusser of *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*, on the other hand, philosophy was expressly not 'a conception of the world, organic to the modern masses [...] it remains a systematic ahistorical discipline in as much as it eternally tracks out the frontier of the "ideological" and the "scientific"'. Marxist philosophy (or, in Althusser's formulation, 'dialectical materialism')

guarantees the defence and illustration of the scientificity proper to historical materialism, and intervenes so that the new knowledges necessary for the class struggle are produced. It helps the historical movement by reaffirming the difference between science and ideology, foiling the ideological illusions that re-emerge and prevent the party and the masses from identifying the decisive objectives. In short, it has a function of infinite correction.⁶³

Marxism could not be, therefore, according to Althusser, '*a (new) philosophy of praxis*', but rather, '*a (new) practice of philosophy*'.⁶⁴ If a Rubicon lay between all philosophy hitherto and this new practice of philosophy, philosophy as such, or the form of philosophy as an autonomous discipline, nevertheless remained an essential component of the new *Weltanschauung*, licensed to continue one of its traditional roles as a guarantee for scientific knowledge—and, by extension, the political practice of 'scientific socialism'.

These different conceptions could be summarised as alternative readings of the concluding sentence of Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: 'The German working-class movement is the inheritor of German classical philosophy'.⁶⁵ Gramsci's interpretation stressed the transformative dimension of the act of inheritance, the older 'form' of philosophy superannuated and replaced by new practices of the socialist movement;

⁶² Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 364.

⁶³ Tosel 1995a, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Althusser 1971a, p. 68.

⁶⁵ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 397.

Althusser's reading emphasised—paradoxically for a thinker of 'breaks' and 'ruptures'—the elements of continuity, positing scientific socialism as the contemporary bearer of the still valid elements of the history of Western philosophy.

1.4.3. Marxism and philosophy

This was not, of course, the first time that the theme of Marxism's relation to philosophy had been so fiercely contested among Marxist theoreticians. It is perhaps only in this perspective of the *longue durée marxiste* that the reasons for Tosel's nomination of this as the 'last great theoretical debate of Marxism' become clear.⁶⁶ For the question of the relationship between Marxism and philosophy had been one of the most important debates animating the tradition prior to the Stalinist structural deformation of Marxist theory. Its unresolved status and therefore incessant return indicated a real lacuna (corresponding to objective limits) in the development of the new thought-form and conception of the world. It is necessary to stress the centrality and significance of philosophy in these early debates, against perspectives that have asserted that the early evolution of the materialist conception of history properly conceived, as distinct from its pre-history, should be tracked primarily in the register of political and economic debates. Philosophical disputes were not a merely marginal methodological prolegomenon to more properly 'Marxist' concerns, as the most cursory survey of journals of the 'classical' phase of Marxism's development, such as *Die Neue Zeit*, readily attest. Rather, they functioned as a type of absent centre around which theoretical initiatives tended to gravitate, or as a sub-text more or less implicitly or explicitly accompanying them. Absent this underlying philosophical dimension, and many of these debates are reduced to merely technical questions in distinct fields without organic interconnection. Their 'world-historical' significance—that is, their political and theoretical contexts and motivations and above all, their broader political function in the elaboration of a new and comprehensive *Weltanschauung* capable of providing an integral vision of the world on a mass-basis—is obscured.

⁶⁶ Tosel 1995a, p. 9.

Determining an adequate relationship to prior philosophy and defining their own work in contradistinction to contemporary philosophical efforts had been central to the formation of Marx's and Engels's thought.⁶⁷ Their multiple and contradictory approaches to these problems is symptomatic of a productive tension that defines the 'theoretical conjuncture' of their work, Janus-faced, one eye upon their repudiated philosophical formation, the other upon the elaboration of a superior mode of thought, both remembrance of past failings and expectations of future success. The *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction* of 1843–4 (echoing themes from Marx's doctoral dissertation) urges the need for a *realisation* [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy, understood in the sense of an *Aufhebung* of prior philosophy by a combative progressive movement.⁶⁸ Not long after, however, *The German Ideology* condemned (German) philosophy as irremediably ideological and therefore to be excluded from a materialist conception of history. Such a conception, quitting the 'realm of philosophy',⁶⁹ would 'ascend from earth to heaven'.⁷⁰ Later still, Marx's methodological remarks on dialectics surrounding his work on *Capital* seem to permit a limited integration of elements from the prior philosophical tradition with the political goals of the organised working-class movement. Such at least was the conclusion that Engels seemed to draw from his long collaboration with Marx. In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* he argued that, with Marx's work (in its turn, following Hegel's), philosophy had given way to science and to 'real positive knowledge of the world'.⁷¹ The only task left to philosophy was supervision of 'the realm of pure thought, so far as it is left: the theory of the laws of the thought process itself, logic and dialectic'.⁷² Neither Marx nor Engels, however, preoccupied with other matters, returned to reconsider explicitly the questions that had driven them in their youth to attempt

⁶⁷ On the theme of the 'sublation [*Aufhebung*] of philosophy' in Marx and Engels, cf. Koivisto and Mehtonen 1994.

⁶⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 1, p. 491; Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 3, p. 181 et sqq.

⁶⁹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 28.

⁷⁰ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 36.

⁷¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 362.

⁷² Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 397. This is essentially the same perspective regarding philosophy that Engels proposed in the posthumously published *Dialectics of Nature* (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 25).

to settle accounts with their ‘former philosophical conscience’ and to elaborate a perspective on the philosophical status of their mature theoretical paradigms.⁷³

The evolution of Marxist philosophy cannot of course be tracked in a solely ‘philological’ register. The uneven development of philosophy within the new *Weltanschauung* corresponded to real social and political limits, above all, the need to respond to popular initiatives and not merely the concerns of restricted circles of intellectuals.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the lack of clear guidance from the founders produced its overdetermined effects upon the following generations of early Social Democracy when they sought to equip themselves with the theoretical resources they needed to fulfil their increasing political responsibilities. The task of the elaboration of a philosophical perspective of, for and within the workers’ movement could not be avoided, for several interrelated reasons. First, the critique of political economy needed to confront, as an element of the ideological struggle, institutions of bourgeois intellectual practice. In the cultures in which Marxism first took hold, philosophy had long functioned as the ‘Queen’ of the sciences. The articulation of the philosophical consequences of Marx’s work was thus an indispensable weapon of ideological struggle, demonstrating its superiority to rival systems of thought on their own terrain and facilitating the assimilation of leading intellectual cadre from the opponent’s camp.

Second, and more importantly, a dismissal of all philosophy *as such* (never authorised by Marx or Engels, who in old age defended Hegel against ‘the peevish, arrogant, mediocre *Epigono*i who now talk large in cultured Germany’, with their ‘inane eclecticism and an anxious concern for career and income’) undoubtedly underestimates the ‘ideological powers’ of philosophy, both subversive and conservative, and the extent to which it could only be repressed at the cost of its return in monstrous and bizarre shapes.⁷⁵ The so-called philosophical eclecticism of significant tendencies within the Second International, for instance, is a case in point. When matters turned ‘philosophical’, theorists

⁷³ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 29, p. 264.

⁷⁴ For overviews of the development of Marxist philosophy, cf. Labica 1980, Callinicos 1983 and Hobsbawm et al. 1978–82, Volume 2 in particular.

⁷⁵ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 35, p. 19; Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 397.

of nascent German Social Democracy seemed to respond with a range of more or less incoherent alternatives: the generalisation of a specific conjunctural judgement into a shibboleth (the bankruptcy of German post-Hegelian philosophy become that of philosophy *tout court*); a return to variants of precisely the Hegelianism from which Marx and Engels had broken; the search for other philosophical foundations for their political practice (above all, neo-Kantianism); or the simple dogmatic assertion of an 'orthodoxy', overdetermined by its relation with these various 'syncretic' forms; all perspectives which were much less than the 'inheritance' of classical German philosophy. An alternative 'form' of philosophy needed to be developed which was adequate to the philosophy 'in a practical state' that had guided Marx's researches and which would permit their continuing theoretical elaboration.

The reception of Hegelianism in post-*Risorgimento* Italy witnessed an attempt at precisely such a development, with the astounding recreation of the co-ordinates of Marx's intellectual formation in the figure of Antonio Labriola. Passing through periods of Hegelianism (under the influence of the Spaventa brothers in Naples) and Herbartism before progressing to the position of a 'critical communism', Labriola valorised the philosophical significance of Marx's work.⁷⁶ He insisted that it represented not an end of philosophy but rather, a refoundation of the entire philosophical project. Furthermore, philosophy for Labriola was not one particular 'component part' of Marxism, but the 'hard core' of an ongoing research project. According to Labriola, the 'philosophy of praxis' is

the heart and soul of historical materialism. *This philosophy is immanent to the things on which it philosophises.* From life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process. From labour, which is an operative knowledge, to knowledge as abstract theory [...]. Finally, historical materialism, or the *philosophy of praxis*, in as much as it invests all of historical and social man, just as it announces the end of all forms of idealism [...], is thus also the end of naturalistic materialism.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ For accounts of Labriola's thought and the intellectual and political environment in which it was formed, cf. Losurdo 1987, Poggi 1982, Gerratana 1973a and 1973b and Dal Pane 1975. For recent evaluations, cf. Labica and Texier 1988 and Burgio 2005. Piccone's introduction to Labriola 1980 provides a useful overview for the Anglophone reader.

⁷⁷ Labriola 1965, p. 216.

Gramsci argued that ‘Labriola, with his conception that the philosophy of Marxism is contained in Marxism itself, is the only one who has sought to give historical materialism a scientific foundation’.⁷⁸ Against the ‘double revision’ to which Marxism had been subjected—on the one hand, the more or less implicit or explicit absorption and deformation of certain aspects of Marx’s thought by ‘idealist currents’ (Croce, Gentile, Sorel, Bergson et al.); on the other hand, the ‘orthodoxy’ of the Second International who sought a philosophy for Marxism, supposedly ‘more comprehensive [...] than a “simple” interpretation of history’ in a variant of pre-Marxian metaphysics—

Labriola is distinguished the one from the other through his maxim that the philosophy of praxis is an independent and original philosophy, which contains within itself the elements for a further development, in order to become, from being an interpretation of history, a general philosophy.⁷⁹

Labriola remained, however, in Tosel’s apposite phrase, ‘the beautiful exception of Second International Marxism’. His one-time disciples in Italy went over to the liberal (Croce) or Fascist (Gentile) camp, while his approach found little comprehension in other national Marxist cultures of the period.⁸⁰ Within sight of Labriola’s Naples, on Capri, Lenin famously declined a invitation from Gorki to a philosophical discussion with a group of Bolsheviks regarding a non-metaphysical Marxist philosophy with a laugh, a gesture later praised as ‘a thesis in itself’ by Althusser in 1968.⁸¹ The debate was only firmly placed

⁷⁸ Q 3, §31.

⁷⁹ Q 16, §9; *SPN*, p. 390.

⁸⁰ An exception would appear to be Trotsky, whose *My Life* fondly recalls a young political prisoner’s encounter with this ‘old Italian Hegelian-Marxist’. In particular, Labriola’s maxim that ‘ideas do not drop from the sky’ appears to have made a profound impression upon him. Nevertheless, Trotsky ultimately dismissed Labriola’s ‘dilettantism’ (Trotsky 1970, p. 119). Gramsci would later respond that ‘this judgement is incomprehensible (unless it is a reference to the gap between theory and practice in Labriola as a person, which would not appear to be the case) except as an unconscious reflection of the pseudoscientific pedantry of the German intellectual group that was so influential in Russia’ (Q 3, §31; *SPN*, p. 386). He would later also return the charge of ‘dilettantism’ to Trotsky with interest, characterising the Bolshevik leader who had severely reprimanded him in Moscow for ultra-leftism as failing to give ‘indications of a practical character’ (Q 13, §24; *SPN*, p. 236). In his own philosophical reflections, Trotsky remained much closer to the main currents of the Second International, or in other terms, the Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* rather than of the *Philosophical Notebooks*.

⁸¹ Althusser 1971a, p. 26. Cf. Haug 2005, p. 230. The trauma of Social-Democratic betrayal and World War I would later lead Lenin to a greater appreciation of the impor-

back on the agenda with the generation inspired by the Russian Revolution, posthumously regarded as the founding fathers of a 'Western Marxism' increasingly distant from the Bolshevik tradition. Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* each in their own ways argued for the importance of 'the philosophical question' within Marxism. Whatever their significant differences, all three were united in affirming an integral relationship between Marxist philosophical and political practice and the political importance of the elaboration Marxist philosophy. Despite condemnation of these 'Western Professors' from the heights of the Comintern, philosophical debates also marked the first decades of the Soviet Union: dialecticians and mechanists strove to elaborate Marxist philosophy, albeit in increasingly distorted and bureaucratic forms.⁸²

The consolidation of Stalinism, however, with its perverse affirmation of Marxism as a break with the prior (metaphysical) philosophical tradition and simultaneous promotion of its own metaphysical system of 'Diamat' as a theoretical apology for its corrupt political practice, managed either to deform these perspectives (Lukács, in his various 'self-critiques' following condemnation), isolate them from the main currents of the international communist movement (Korsch and, in another more complicated sense, Gramsci), or summarily to liquate them, in a non-metaphorical sense (that Bukharin eventually confronted the same cold fate as some of his erstwhile antagonists is nothing if not a tragic irony). The success of this theoretical 'hijack' can be measured not only by the extent to which the philosophical positions canonised by Stalinist orthodoxy came to be regarded as almost synonymous with 'Marxist philosophy' (now defined as 'dialectical materialism'), but also by its effective rewriting of the history of Marxist theory in its own image. For an entire historical period, Marxist philosophical research laboured under a profound ignorance of the true complexity and variety of its own history. It was a night in which all cows were black and all 'real' Marxist philosophies 'dialectical-

tance of philosophy for Marxism, in his reading of Hegel posthumously published as his *Philosophical Notebooks*. Cf. Balibar 2007 and Kouvelakis 2007. Gramsci had only limited knowledge of these texts, but it seems unlikely, or rather, impossible, for reasons that will be examined in this study, that he would have changed his assessment that Lenin's 'true philosophy' is to be found in his political theory and practice rather than in his explicitly 'philosophical' texts cf. Q 4, §46; *SPN*, p. 403.

⁸² On the philosophical debates in the early years of the Soviet Union, cf. Zapata 1983.

materialist'. Not a few significant theorists, accepting that the 'official' version (with which they often had experienced some sympathy in their youth) was indeed the only possible philosophical consequence of Marx's thought, bid adieu to the tradition without further examination of its lost opportunities or roads untaken.

Althusser's entire work, albeit by means of a complex philosophical strategy of affirming orthodox 'Diamat' positions in order to open them out from within, placed this fundamental debate firmly back on the public agenda. Most significantly, the importance for the Marxist tradition that Althusser ascribed to philosophical questions represented a clear departure from Stalinist 'normalisation' or 'quarantine'—all the more so as it came from 'within' one of the most Stalinist of (post-) Stalinist Communist Parties. Against their marginalisation or reduction to 'technical' problems, he argued for the centrality and (both direct and mediated) political importance of philosophical debates within the Marxist tradition. Many did and still do entertain serious doubts about the validity of Althusser's various theses, proposed at different moments throughout his development, regarding the relation between Marxism and philosophy and the status of Marxist philosophy. Few, however, would question the immensely stimulating and productive impact of his intervention and the extent to which its international reverberation redefined the received picture of Marxist philosophy and the ways in which it could be practised and concretised in research projects.

1.5. The Althusserian and Gramscian moments

A strong case can be made that the theoretical conjuncture of *Althusser ou Gramsci* remains 'the last great theoretical debate of Marxism' (in the precise sense with which Tosel employed this phrase) even to this day. I am referring here not merely to its unfinished status, still capable, on occasions, of provoking controversy and reconsideration after forty years.⁸³ More importantly, no single initiative in the intervening period has so forcefully and influentially posed the question of Marxism's philosophical status as Althusser's critique of

⁸³ Cf. e.g. Robelin 1992; Macherey 2005.

Gramsci. *Contra* the recurrent claims of a 'death of Marxism' proclaimed by the chorus of the post-Marxist comedy, Marxist theoretical production of diverse tendencies and quality has continued at a steady rate over the last decades, in unpropitious conditions consolidating older work and opening new fields of research. These projects, however, have usually occurred in other fields: primarily, history, political economy and political theory. New philosophical research projects, on the other hand, have been strongly influenced by, even if not entirely internal to or derived from, the positions regarding Marxism and philosophy staked out by *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. Althusser's critique of Gramsci is thus not of merely 'historical interest', as a predecessor of contemporary debates; rather, its terms remain operative. As Althusser himself once said of Marx's philosophy, it is not adequate to say 'that much water has flowed under the bridge and that our problems are no longer the same. We are discussing living water which has not yet flowed away'.⁸⁴ This is to say that the theoretical conjuncture established by this critique remains, to a large extent, our theoretical conjuncture today. Any attempt to reanimate debates about the status of Marxist philosophy must necessarily initially inhabit these positions and treat them as a point of departure, in order to be adequate not only to the past of Marxist theory, but also to its present.

In order to emphasise this more general and enduring theoretical significance, I propose to refer to these 'two types or poles' in the following study as the Althusserian and Gramscian 'moments' of Marxism. In the first instance, this formulation may be taken to echo and extend Gregory Elliott's previously mentioned delineation of the 'moment of Althusser', born from the events of 1956 (Khrushchev's secret speech, crisis in the international Communist movement) but crystallising in definite and irrevocable ways in the changed conjuncture of the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s: the moment of self-non-contemporaneity of a distinctive intellectual-political project. Similar temporal delays characterised the 'moment of Gramsci'. Imprisoned at the end of 1926, Gramsci hoped to continue the research project outlined in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* (itself arising from the entire arch of experiences of the revolutionary wave following World War I and its defeat by Fascism). At the same time, however, he needed to struggle in order to remain 'actual', that is, to find

⁸⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 31.

ways to reduce the isolation from the raging debates of the international Communist movement that threatened to make him non-contemporaneous with his own time.

Yet, as my previous comments will have indicated, my characterisation of the continuing relevance of these two types of Marxism aims to emphasise something more than the verity that Gramsci's and Althusser's interventions remain inseparable from the determinations of their own historical moments; or, rather, it aims to avoid a certain idealist vulgarisation of this fundamental orientation of Marxist historiography which is perhaps more common in treatments of the history of Marxism than is usually recognised. According to such a teleological view, the difference between Althusser's and Gramsci's positions would indicate a merely temporal distinction between two 'phases' in the diachronic development of Marxist philosophy, the former moment being a more authentic 'origin' of the latter, or the second figuring as the cumulative and linear 'truth' of the first. Instead, my adoption of the Hegelian motif of a 'moment' aims to indicate also a certain (possible) contemporaneity between Althusser's and Gramsci's thought even within their non-contemporaneity. In other words, viewed in a 'synchronic' sense, or comprehended *sub specie aeternitatis* (in the fullest Spinozist i.e. anti-metaphysical sense of that phrase), the Gramscian and Althusserian moments today figure as agonists on the *Kampfplatz* that is contemporary Marxist theory. They should be understood as signalling two significant tendencies or approaches to the question of Marxism and philosophy which have accompanied the tradition throughout its history, now redefined through their indissoluble association (for contemporary Marxists) with those proper names. In a strict sense, this debate had and still has a 're-presentative' force.

1.5.1. Gramsci's organic concepts

Although, as I have argued, it is the Althusserian rather than the Gramscian moment that is currently ascendant in Marxist philosophy, there are at least three very good reasons for soberly reconsidering the critique that established this theoretical conjuncture. First, Althusser's critique was not without serious limitations and fundamental misunderstandings of Gramsci's positions, despite his numerous prefatory precautions and commendations. His declared intention was to criticise Gramsci's 'words' only after having 'confirmed that

they have the function of 'organic' concepts, concepts which really belong to his most profound philosophical problematic'.⁸⁵ However, the absence of Valentino Gerratana's monumental critical edition (1975) at the time of Althusser's critique (1965) meant that he was literally unable to provide an analysis of the dialectical emergence and specificity of Gramsci's concepts. At the best, he needed to rely upon his own attentive reading of the earlier thematic edition of the *Prison Notebooks* and the scholarship (largely Italian, heavily overdetermined by the previously noted theoretical and political conjunctures) that had emerged in its wake.⁸⁶ He was not, however, able to study the *Prison Notebooks* in the form in which Gramsci had written them, and thus could not address the specific interpretative problems that emerge from the distinctive literary form of these texts. The inevitable misinterpretations that emerged from such a 'hobbled' reading were, in their own time, understandable and necessary; their continuing acceptance and influence in the wider Marxist culture today, when the resources of the critical edition and detailed philological studies are available, is not.

Other limitations and misunderstandings were derived from the early Althusser's strategy of immanent critique of Stalinist orthodoxy, conserving 'the formal structure of Marxism-Leninism'.⁸⁷ This, it would seem, blinded him—in a different and this time wilful sense—to the full philosophical import of Gramsci's theses. Thus, for example, Althusser, following the letter if not the spirit of Diamat's division of Marxism into two component parts (a science and a philosophy), announced that he wished to formulate certain 'theoretical reservations' with regard to Gramsci's 'interpretation of *dialectical materialism*' (which Althusser understood, of course, as synonymous with 'Marxist philosophy').⁸⁸ Yet, as even the most casual acquaintance with either of the two

⁸⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

⁸⁶ Althusser admitted in an appendix to the Italian edition of *Reading 'Capital'* that he had been strongly influenced by some of these readings; cf. Althusser 1971b. He also expressed his doubts about the thoroughness of his scholarship in a letter to his Italian translator; cf. the letter of 2 July 1965 in Althusser and Madonia 1998, pp. 623–4. In other letters to Franca Madonia, he also acknowledged the primarily 'political' motivations of his 'philosophical' critique, admitting that his reading of Gramsci had been heavily overdetermined by his rejection of what he argued was the social-democratic turn of the Italian and French Communist Parties in the same period. Cf. Althusser and Madonia 1998, p. 655.

⁸⁷ Tosel 1995a, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

editions of the *Prison Notebooks* makes clear (i.e. not only Gerratana's critical edition, but also the earlier thematically organised edition, which was available to Althusser), Gramsci does not propose any interpretation of 'dialectical materialism', whether in its pre-or post-Stalin forms. Rather, he unilaterally *rejects* the philosophical perspectives that later congealed into this court philosophy of socialism in one country as inadequate formulations of the philosophical significance of Marx's work and deleterious for the task of forging proletarian hegemony.⁸⁹ According to the terms of Althusser's critique, however, it would appear that the philosophy of praxis was merely a region on the continent of 'dialectical materialism' impudently ignoring the most recent of tectonic shifts. The radical difference of Gramsci's perspective on the question of Marxism and philosophy, self-consciously fashioned against an emerging orthodoxy, is thereby obscured and the debate reduced to terms that cannot but 'demonstrate' the validity of Althusser's claims from the outset. Similarly, Althusser's assertion that Gramsci's stress upon 'the "historicism" of Marxism [...] is *in reality* an allusion to the resolutely *materialist* character of Marx's conception (both in historical and dialectical materialism)',⁹⁰ can be regarded as little more than an almost sophisticated distortion of his antagonist's positions. As we shall see, Gramsci's stress upon the 'historicism' of Marxism (including his historicist redefinition of matter as 'a human relation',⁹¹ rather than metaphysical category) means precisely just that and is not usefully elucidated through the imposition of this type of allegorical 'key'.

Still other misunderstandings were due to the particular nature of Althusser's political and theoretical conjunctures and the positions he adopted within them in relation to other thinkers and tendencies. His characterisation of Gramsci's 'absolute humanism', for instance, was undoubtedly heavily overdetermined by the rise of a 'socialist humanism' with claims to anti-Stalinist credentials in the wake of 1956, its recuperation by the leaderships as a type of 'Stalinism with a human face' around the time when Althusser's work was taking on definite form, and the later 'humanist controversy' in the PCF, which his

⁸⁹ As Labica has noted, Gramsci 'thought in a pre-Diamat frame of reference', dying in fact in 1937, the same year in which Stalin's *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* carved this formal distinction (between Marxist science and philosophy) into stone and canonised dialectical materialism as the only possible Marxist philosophy. Cf. Labica 1995, p. 52.

⁹⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 129.

⁹¹ *Q* 11, §30.

vigorous 'theoretical anti-humanism' helped to ignite. When Gramsci spoke of Marxism's humanism, Althusser could thus see in it little more than 'revolutionary humanism of the echoes of the 1917 Revolution',⁹² similar to that by which he felt besieged in the mid-1960s, rather than a research programme exploring the social and political efficacy of intellectuals.

Further errors can similarly be attributed to the heat and dust stirred up by other polemics, obscuring a clear sight of his ostensible target. Thus, much of Althusser's assessment of Gramsci's historicism, particularly its supposed 'transformation of the Marxist totality into a variant of the Hegelian totality',⁹³ is more suited, as Tosel notes, to 'soft forms of historicism' such as that of Sartre, rather than to Gramsci's 'absolute historicism'.⁹⁴ Similarly, Althusser's claim that Gramsci's notion of praxis was overly generic, founded upon a model of '*experimental practice*' ('borrowed not so much from the reality of modern science as from a certain ideology of science')⁹⁵ was undoubtedly derived more from his reading of Colletti than of the *Prison Notebooks* (and, in truth, is more applicable to this and other notions of praxis deriving from the rigorously *anti-historicist*, science-oriented Della-Volpean school, proponents of positions much closer to Althusser's than it was comfortable for him to admit). All too often, Gramsci suffered the fate of being a straw target of these critiques. Evidence that ran contrary to this conflation of distinct positions was dismissed by Althusser with a rhetoric of 'variations' of a common 'problematic' (crossing the same 'field', 'by quite different paths').⁹⁶ Whatever the immense fertility of the concept of a problematic in Althusser's work (most notably, in relation to the young Marx), in this case it confused more than it clarified.

The result of these limitations and misunderstandings was a critique that often hit its mark while paradoxically simultaneously shooting wide of it. In my view, Althusser was correct to point to the debilitating political effects of a spiritualist historicism for whom the historical process appeared as a steady narrative of 'progress'; he was correct to argue that the Marxist concept of the social totality is qualitatively distinct from social theories founded upon a notion of unification of contradictory elements and a self-reinforcing and

⁹² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 142.

⁹³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 136.

⁹⁴ Tosel 1995a, p. 11.

⁹⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 135.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

(potentially) self-transparent moment of pacific totalisation; he correctly noted the political weaknesses of a naïve humanism and abstract appeals to human will at the expense of a scientific analysis of the structures of capitalist society; he was certainly correct to insist that any Marxism worthy of that name could not be reduced to a mere ideology or direct expression of the historical process, but was constituted by a distinctive ‘theoretical surplus’ of a type never seen before in human history. He was incorrect, however, to assert that these positions are to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*, whatever other critics, anti-Althusserian and supposedly pro-Gramscian alike, may have supposed.

The present study does not propose, therefore, to make ‘Gramsci some kind of weapon of war against certain supposed enemies, real or imaginary’, a tendency against which Buci-Glucksmann eloquently warned.⁹⁷ Nothing could be more futile today than a latter-day rerun of the ‘structuralist versus humanist Marxism’ debate of the 1970s. Rather, as Buci-Glucksmann suggested, ‘it would be more important to ask whether Althusser’s drastic and sometimes unjust criticism does not liberate certain unexplored and unexploited aspects of Gramsci’s thought’, bringing ‘to light certain underestimated or even repressed aspects of his work’.⁹⁸ The conceptual clarity and precision of Althusser’s critique, therefore, even if ultimately invalidated by the errors of its substantive theses, helps in a negative sense to redirect attention to the letter—and the spirit—of Gramsci’s text. As we shall see, many of Althusser’s objections to Gramsci’s positions indeed seem to be legitimately derived from the individual quotations and passages he was able to assemble from the published texts available to him. When those same passages are restored to their context in their specific notebooks and their role in the overarching structure of Gramsci’s carceral theoretical project, however, Althusser’s judgements are decisively refuted as inapplicable to Gramsci’s text. The *modus operandi* of this study, proceeding by way of a close examination of the interpretation presented in *Reading ‘Capital’* in the light of the text of the critical edition and the gains of Gramscian scholarship made after the mid 1960s, takes its inspiration from Althusser’s admirable aim to determine Gramsci’s ‘most profound philosophical problematic’.⁹⁹ It departs from it by trying to avoid the blind spots that

⁹⁷ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 411.

⁹⁸ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 68.

⁹⁹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

Althusser seems to have been unable to avoid at the time but which ultimately compromised his critique and make its continuing acceptance and influence untenable. A preliminary task in each of the investigations in this study will therefore be to distinguish clearly between positions ascribed to Gramsci, and what he actually wrote, free from the supposed need to pass it through the eye of the needle of a Marxist-Leninist 'heterodoxy' or distort it in a maze of mirrors.

1.5.2. An enduring encounter

The second reason for reconsidering the early Althusser's judgement of Gramsci consists in the fact that Althusser himself seems to have come to doubt its theoretical presuppositions, though without explicitly retracting the condemnation of Gramsci that was founded upon them. *Reading 'Capital'* was by no means the first or the last time that Althusser sought to measure his own thought against that of a man he had never met. Reflecting upon his philosophical practice and the controversy it engendered, Althusser argued that a philosophy

only exists in so far as it 'works out' its difference from other philosophies, from those which, by similarity or contrast, help it to sense, perceive and grasp itself, so that it can take up its own *positions*.¹⁰⁰

His own thought had been formed by such a taking up and testing of positions or—as Althusser elsewhere defined it, taking his model from Marx's continual return not only to Hegel but also to Aristotle—a 'detour'.¹⁰¹ Thus, Althusser's nomination of his own elective affinities, or, in the terms Gramsci borrowed from Bruno, his *eroici furori*: Spinoza, Machiavelli, Epicurus, and increasingly later, Heidegger, Deleuze and Derrida.¹⁰² Above all, it was Spinoza

¹⁰⁰ Althusser 1976, p. 133.

¹⁰¹ 'In our subjective history, and in the existing ideological and theoretical conjuncture, this detour became a necessity. [...] We made a detour via Spinoza in order to improve our understanding of Marx's philosophy. To be precise: since Marx's materialism forced us to think out the meaning of the necessary detour via Hegel, we made the detour via Spinoza in order to clarify our understanding of Marx's detour via Hegel. A detour, therefore; but with regard to another detour'. (Althusser 1976, p. 134.)

¹⁰² Gramsci derived the concept of an 'heroic fury' from Giordano Bruno: 'It is a matter of common observation among all scholars, from personal experience, that any new

who came to figure as Althusser's privileged 'philosophical' interlocutor.¹⁰³ On repeated occasions and with increasing frequency as the years went on, Althusser declared his fascination with Spinoza's 'philosophical strategy' and 'unparalleled audacity'.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, it is the name of Spinoza that is now identified most strongly as one of the driving forces and distinctive features of Althusserian Marxism, as evidenced by the veritable Spinoza renaissance that emerged from the decomposition of the classical Althusserian paradigm.¹⁰⁵ We could go so far as to paraphrase a famous saying of Hegel regarding Spinoza: when one begins to be a Spinozist, one must first have been an Althusserian Marxist.

Yet, as I have previously argued, there is a very good case to be made for regarding Althusser's encounter with Gramsci as more 'primal' (in the Freudian sense) for the distinctively Marxist dimensions of his project (that is, the Althusserian moment considered as a moment within the Marxist tradition). Not only was the critique of *Reading 'Capital'* seminal for defining conceptual features of this project, but Althusser also returned to Gramsci on numerous occasions in order to gain new resources and perspectives for a changed conjuncture. More than any other figure in the Marxist tradition, except for the founders (and, arguably, more than Engels), Gramsci was Althusser's perpetual agonist, the other major interlocutor of Marx with whom, above all others, he repeatedly felt the need 'to settle accounts'. Thus his famous intervention into the wake of May 68, partially published in English as 'Ideology and Ideo-

theory studied with "heroic fury" (that is, studied not out of mere external curiosity but for reasons of deep interest) for a certain period, especially if one is young, attracts the student of its own accord and takes possession of his whole personality, only to be limited by the study of the next theory, until such a time as a critical equilibrium is created and one learns to study deeply but without succumbing to the fascination of the system and the author under study' (Q 16, §2.) Cf. *SPN*, p. 383.

¹⁰³ Machiavelli was another increasingly important touchstone of Althusser's researches; but the philosophical significance of Machiavelli's thought, for Althusser, was reached via a detour of his political theory, as a theorist of the conjuncture. His engagement with Spinoza, on the other hand, was concerned in the first instance with classically 'philosophical' theses by means of which he then approached the 'political' dimension of Spinoza's thought. Expressed in terms borrowed from Gramsci, whereas Althusser found the philosophical significance of Machiavelli in his politics, he discerned the political significance of Spinoza in his philosophy. On Althusser's reading of Machiavelli, and its indebtedness to Gramsci, cf. Lahtinen 2009.

¹⁰⁴ Althusser 1997, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ A selection from these works, most of which remain untranslated, is available in English in Montag and Stolze (eds.) 1997.

logical State Apparatuses', offered an Althusserian 'translation' of the Gramscian notion of the 'hegemonic apparatus'; during the debates in the mid-1970s in the PCF on the thesis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Gramsci, and a certain interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, were continually interrogated by Althusser in a series of texts.¹⁰⁶

In 1978, looking back on the heady years of his most 'public' production from the viewpoint of the 'crisis of Marxism' (announced by himself), Althusser confided to a friend that

not everything about this adventure was vain or worthless. [...] But the question is how to 'manage' this presumed or presumptive past in a situation like the one we're saddled with today. The only answer that I can find for the moment is silence. [...] A silence that can become permanent, why not? Or a step back in order to publish a few little things after all, on Machiavelli, Gramsci and company, or a few impudent remarks on philosophy, an old idea that I've been carrying around with me for some time [...] or, who knows, something on the Epicurean tradition.¹⁰⁷

His murder of his wife soon after, in 1980, saw the beginning of 'Althusser's solitude'. It would last until his own death (a 'second death') ten years later. Althusser, of course, 'did not cease to think and write in the interval', as Gregory Elliott notes. 'Stepping back, as he had anticipated in his letter to Merab Mamardashvili, he did indeed return to the—an—"Epicurean tradition" and Machiavelli'.¹⁰⁸ Gathering together materials on which he had been working for some time, he embarked on what was to be his last 'adventure', the 'materialism of the encounter' or 'aleatory materialism'.

These new positions, even if they can be traced to earlier writings (as several perceptive critics have already observed),¹⁰⁹ nevertheless represent a significant departure from the theoretical structure mapped out in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. This is particularly and most strikingly the case regarding the question of the relation between Marxism and philosophy. When Althusser

¹⁰⁶ The most remarkable of these is 'Marx in His Limits', which may be regarded as Althusser's political 'last will and testament'. It tellingly breaks off in the middle of a discussion of Gramsci's theory of the state and the 'autonomy of politics'. Cf. Althusser 2006, pp. 7–162.

¹⁰⁷ Althusser 2006, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Elliott 2006, p. 354.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Lahtinen 2009 [1997]; Morfino 2002; Turchetto, 2003; Goshgarian 2006.

proposes in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Marxist philosophy is to be conceived of not as the guardian of scientificity but as class struggle in the field of theory, he enacts a break with his earlier work that is as definitive as it is decisive for his later development. This new political or even 'politicist' orientation intensifies throughout the 1970s; by the time of 'Marx in His Limits' in 1978, and even more so in the texts post-1980, it has crystallised into an entirely new project. Formally: *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'* had attempted to explicate a philosophy of Marxism, the philosophy buried in Marx's work 'in a practical state'. The philosophy of the encounter, on the other hand, strives to be, at the most, not a philosophy of Marxism, but a philosophy for Marxism. The earlier ambition of replacing Diamat as the 'true' philosophy of Marxism is entirely abandoned, as Althusser adopts more modest 'activist' postures: this 'non-philosophy' will merely attempt 'to correspond to what Marx wrote in *Capital*', to be 'capable of accounting for the conceptual discoveries' that he put to work there.¹¹⁰ More modest than its precursor in terms of its rationalism and claims to scientificity, it is nevertheless much more ambitious with regard to the political status and efficacy that it assigns to this philosophy, or rather, 'non-philosophy'.

Ironically, many of the positions advanced by the late Althusser bear a remarkable similarity to those of Gramsci that he had mercilessly criticised twenty years earlier, to such an extent that it would even be appropriate to speak of Althusser's Gramscian *Kehre*,¹¹¹ were Gramsci not already one of Althusser's permanent interlocutors. However, even though the writings of the 1980s are replete with references, often elliptical, to Gramsci, they do not explicitly retract the critique of *Reading 'Capital'* or inscribe Gramsci in the subterranean current of the materialism of the encounter that they propose. In terms of the question of Marxism and philosophy, Althusser indeed returned to 'the—an—Epicurean tradition and Machiavelli'; but he remained revealingly silent about Gramsci, the figure who had prompted him to embark on these series of 'adventures'. One way of considering these late writings would therefore be to see them as enacting a rapprochement with Gramsci; but one that nevertheless needed to remain undeclared, necessarily, as their condition

¹¹⁰ Althusser 2006, p. 259 et sqq.

¹¹¹ As opposed to the *Kehre* of a very different type proposed by, among other critics, Negri. Cf. Negri 1996, pp. 58–60.

of possibility, in order to avoid slumping into the 'permanent silence' that a 'disavowal of the disavowal' would entail. The present study offers no overall assessment of Althusser's late writings or their elective affinities with the Gramscian philosophy of praxis. However, it does refer to those particularly acute formulations of the late Althusser that indicate the extent and force of his 'enduring encounter' with Gramsci. If there is indeed an integral relation between the Spinozist-structuralist Marxist of the 1960s and the aleatory materialist of the 1980s, a judicious use of the positions of the latter can be used to throw light, in the form of an implicit 'self-critique of the critique', upon the contradictions that plagued the former's reading of Gramsci.

1.5.3. Marxist philosophy today

The third reason for reconsidering this clash between two proponents of a *Weltanschauung* still out of fashion in the most cultivated circles regards the contemporary revival of this research programme and political movement. Signs are that the time when Marxism was treated, similarly to Spinoza and Hegel in other times, as a 'dead dog', is coming to a close. Partially determined by the political conjuncture, partially occasioned by the bankruptcy of the theoretical initiatives that had sought to superannuate it, a series of concepts central to the Marxist tradition, not so long ago consigned to the 'dustbin of history', are once again demonstrating their fertility for analysing contemporary events: imperialism, crisis, the state, the globalising dimensions of capital and a range of associated concepts and debates are enjoying a revival and creative further development. I propose that the apparently decided debate between Althusser and Gramsci is similarly ripe for a re-examination. Specifically, returning to this debate offers us the opportunity of reproposing a distinctively Marxist philosophical research programme as a necessary element within this broader process of contemporary renewal.

Clearly, my use of the phrase 'Marxist philosophical research programme' aims to indicate something very different from the reassertion of what once passed as 'Marxist philosophy', i.e., dialectical materialism. Similarly, it signifies something more than the widespread invocation of the name of Marx, and often even substantive engagement with his theses, by a number of the most significant of contemporary philosophers (e.g. Badiou, Negri, Balibar). Rather, it points to the research programme outlined by Gramsci when he argued that

at the level of theory the philosophy of praxis cannot be confounded with or reduced to any other philosophy. Its originality lies not only in its transcending of previous philosophies but also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself.¹¹²

In other words, the notion of a distinctively Marxist philosophical research programme affirms a commitment, not merely to a ‘philosophical’ reading of Marx, but to the elaboration of the philosophical dimensions of the ‘Copernican Revolution’ (Althusser) or ‘historical epoch’ (Gramsci) inaugurated in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and continued in different forms, both ‘theoretical’ and ‘political’, by the subsequent Marxist traditions. The horizon that informs this study, then, is not merely a philosophy of Marx, or even a philosophy *for* Marxism (past or future), but the possible forms of a future philosophy *of* Marxism, considered as a critical and self-reflexive *Weltanschauung* capable of renewal and renovation, containing

in itself all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world [that could go on to vivify] an integral practical organisation of society, that is, [to become] a total integral civilisation.¹¹³

Any attempt at the revitalisation of such a Marxist philosophy today must necessarily engage with Althusser’s and Gramsci’s positions, adjudicating between them and within them but also probing them for points of fundamental agreement that may underlie the superficial juxtaposition established by the polemical force of Althusser’s critique. Such a return of the question of Marxism and philosophy poses not insignificant challenges and opportunities for the broader recompositions and realignments of the Marxist tradition. In the form of the Althusserian and Gramscian moments, it takes us to the very heart of debates that have traversed and defined Marxism’s history, thus situating our contemporary efforts as an inheritance of a tradition in the fullest sense of the term: that is, as both continuation and transformation, fidelity and renewal.

¹¹² Q 4, § 11; Q 11, § 27; *SPN*, p. 464.

¹¹³ Q 4, § 11; Q 11, § 27; *SPN*, p. 462.

1.6. Philosophy, hegemony and the state: 'metaphysical event' and 'philosophical fact'

The following study will therefore return to the moment of Althusser's critique of Gramsci and dismissal of the 'philosophy of praxis' as an inadequate philosophy of Marxism. More precisely, it will offer an analysis of the three central Gramscian concepts from the *Prison Notebooks* to which Althusser most vigorously objected: an 'absolute historicism', an 'absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought' and 'an absolute humanism of history'.¹¹⁴ These can be considered as the 'three component parts' of Gramsci's proposal for a renewal of Marxist philosophy, offering a kaleidoscopic perspective onto the philosophy of praxis considered in its various dimensions. At the same time, they represent an order of reasoning whereby Gramsci sought to concretise his thought and draw its fullest political conclusions, in a determinate political conjuncture.

Thus, before turning to an analysis of the emergence, formation and significance of these categories within the *Prison Notebooks*, it is first necessary to specify the political horizon within which these philosophical arguments were composed. This will be done by engaging with some of the most influential 'images of Gramsci', particularly as they are presented in Perry Anderson's 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'. This analysis should not be regarded as a 'political' or 'historical' detour, external to Gramsci 'philosophical' proposi-

¹¹⁴ As Althusser's critique was largely limited to the *Prison Notebooks*, the current study will not be concerned with Gramsci's precarceral writings, except where these throw a particular light on the argument. This is not to say that there is an 'epistemological rupture' between Gramsci's early writings and the *Prison Notebooks*. As Frosini has argued, such a forced opposition is underwritten by a particularly fanciful notion of penitence, in one form or another. 'Too often fictional oppositions between the *Prison Notebooks* and the previous writings have been constructed, almost as if arrest and "defeat" would have led the Secretary of the Communist Party of Italy to revise fundamentally some of his theoretical and political positions' (Frosini 2003, p. 18). Despite the long-standing legend, there is little evidence that Gramsci 'revised' his precarceral positions, and much that suggests he instead sought to deepen them. In addition to the terms dictated by Althusser's focus, the present study deals largely with the *Prison Notebooks* themselves because they constitute a particularly intense philosophical experience or 'event', a veritable conceptual furnace in which Gramsci's former arms were reforged and renewed. In other words, these notebooks have a particularly intense philosophical status that justifies and repays an exclusive focus for the purposes of this present study.

tions strictly conceived. On the contrary, it is precisely this political horizon that gives Gramsci's philosophical perspectives their integral meaning and explosive power—even and especially today.

As we shall see, philosophy, politics and history stand in a dialectical relationship of simultaneous distinction and identity in the *Prison Notebooks*, in such a way that the traditional separation of these spheres is immediately confounded. It is not simply that Gramsci maintains, in accordance with the Marxist tradition, that all philosophy hitherto has been a part of the 'existing state of affairs'; nor is it that, much more difficultly, he proposes that the state itself is a profoundly philosophical event, the realisation of speculation as a form of social organisation. Rather, the great difficulty of the philosophical elaboration of the *Prison Notebooks* consists in Gramsci's claim that the practice of proletarian hegemony presupposes, requires and produces a new conception of philosophy as such. Buci-Glucksmann argues that the *Prison Notebooks* revolve around

an astounding combination [...] of two projects that are customarily quite separate: research into the state, and research into Marxist philosophy in its relationship to the masses. They both converge in a single reformulation of the concept of the state in its relation with society.¹¹⁵

This is indeed true. However, just as significantly, Gramsci's reformulation of the concept of the state also leads him to reformulate the conditions of possibility of a philosophy 'beyond' the state. Rather than as a function of the state, philosophy—a completely new type of philosophy—is redefined as a *relationship of hegemony*. In one of the most enigmatic passages of the *Prison Notebooks*, written in 1931, Gramsci argues that

we arrive thus at the equality of, or equation between, 'philosophy and politics', thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis. Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies [...] and the only 'philosophy' is history in action, that is, life itself. It is in this sense that one can interpret the thesis of the German proletariat as the heir of classical German philosophy—and one can affirm that the theorisation and realisation of hegemony carried out by Ilich [i.e. Lenin] was also a great 'metaphysical' event.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 13.

¹¹⁶ *Q* 7, §35; *SPN*, pp. 356–7.

In a later moment, however, towards the end of May 1932, Gramsci extends this moment of negative critique and elaborates it in positive terms.

Ilich advanced philosophy as philosophy in so far as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge: it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact.¹¹⁷

The 'Gramscian moment' consists in the distance taken between those two moments—between 1931 and 1932, between the description of hegemony as a “‘metaphysical event’” and the discovery of a type of hegemony that would be a ‘philosophical fact’. Just as Marx proposed that the ‘expansive political form’ of the Commune was the ‘political forms at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour’,¹¹⁸ or a ‘non-State State’, so Gramsci comes to propose that the philosophy of praxis is the expansive philosophical form at last discovered of a genuine proletarian hegemony, ‘renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself’.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Q 1011, §12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6.

¹¹⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 22, p. 334.

¹¹⁹ Q 4, §11; Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

Chapter Two

Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci?

2.1. Incompletion and reconstruction

Barely developed ideas [...] questions to himself [...] often unsubstantiated suppositions.¹

Croce's judgement of the original thematically organised edition of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (edited by Platone, under the direction of Togliatti, between 1948 and 1951) has only been amplified since the publication of the critical edition edited by Valentino Gerratana in 1975. Appearing to the first glance 'like a large work site, where the provisional and incomplete nature are at home',² a closer examination seems to confirm that the *Prison Notebooks* are less a theoretical 'work' than an intricate, intriguing (and sometimes, perplexing and frustrating) 'textual labyrinth'.³ It is a labyrinth with numerous entrances that seem to multiply their number even further upon each incursion, leading the reader onto a seemingly ouroboric path. The steady narrative progression of a theoretical system that 'knows where it is going' gives way to an incessant circularity of conceptual intensification of initial forms.

¹ Croce 1947.

² Gerratana 1997, p. xii.

³ Buttigieg 1992, p. ix.

The traveller through this labyrinth is accompanied by a constant sense of *déjà vu*, a sense just as quickly dispelled as provoked when the entirely new rapidly follows upon the already seen. The *Prison Notebooks* fascinate their readers, tantalising, seducing, drawing them in further on a quest to arrive at a centre that would finally permit them to map the intricate winding alleys of this seemingly endless labyrinth. Yet such a centre is always-already absent. Just as soon as the reader believes to have found a vantage point from which rationally to reconstruct the whole, Gramsci's thought opens out onto vistas unseen: the multiplying paths of the *Prison Notebooks* are so many *Holzwege* whose second visitation sees them unexpectedly transformed into paths to a sunlit clearing, itself soon replaced by the half-light of a translucent structural canopy.

Prior to the conceptual work proposed by Althusser—namely, to determine Gramsci's 'real organic concepts'—the reader's first task would therefore seem to be a fundamentally literary-critical one: to determine the nature and status of the literary form of the *Prison Notebooks*, in order to establish reading protocols appropriate to them. Fabio Frosini has compared the 'material nature of this singular work' to the almost contemporaneous *Passagenwerk* of Benjamin, or, perhaps anachronistically but nevertheless suggestively, the manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci.⁴ Yet another elective affinity might be that with the work of James Joyce, near contemporary of Gramsci, resident for a period in Italy and prisoner in his own way of the nets of 'nationality, language, religion'. Joyce famously declared that he had put so many riddles in his works that they would keep the professors busy for three centuries. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, though written in a plain and accessible prose that even today shames the deception-fostering rhetoric of so many major Italian dailies, inspire a similar search for sources, glosses, commentary. The reader would therefore seem called upon not so much to read the *Prison Notebooks* as to decipher them, or, as with Joyce's *Ulysses*, to 'translate' their formal foreignness into a known literary convention. As Buttigieg notes,

virtually every description and discussion of Gramsci's texts contains an observation about its fragmentariness and its incomplete character. Such observations are frequently accompanied by the assumption that it is the

⁴ Frosini 2003, p. 15.

task of the Gramscian scholar to reconstruct out of these fragments a coherent whole. Implicitly or explicitly, the fragmentary nature of the notebooks is customarily attributed to the brutal conditions under which they were composed. Fragmentation, in other words, is taken to be an unfortunate obstacle that stands in the way of understanding what Gramsci meant to say or would have said if he only had had the time and the means to produce a 'normal' book, or series of books. Hence the efforts to 'organize' the notebooks, to collect the fragments around certain themes or under certain rubrics.⁵

Perhaps the most telling comparison, however, is the work of Marx himself. Not only did the notebooks of Marx's exile, *Capital*, remain famously incomplete at his life's end, a mass of fragments, annotations, work plans and references. Even that part of it guided to the press by Marx's own hand, Volume One, underwent anterior revisions, additions and excisions, making any notion of a 'definitive' text of Marx's masterpiece more interpretative wish than reality. Furthermore, as has become clear from the work of the second *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), incompleteness is the *Leitmotiv* of Marx's entire extant corpus, in all its phases, composed as it is by a plethora of *Rohfassungen* [rough drafts] for unfinished texts. Most significantly, the philologically rigorous work of the MEGA² has revealed a hitherto not fully recognised incompleteness in a stronger sense: many of the 'canonical' texts of Marxism—not merely texts that have long been recognised as 'artificial' such as *Dialectics of Nature*, Volumes Two and Three of *Capital* and its supposed fourth volume, *Theories of Surplus Value*, but also works that have long been treated as more 'organic' such as the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology*—are not in fact 'works' at all, if we understand that term in the conventional sense of a text authorised by the proper name of an author. Rather, they were constructed long after the deaths of Marx and Engels from manuscripts, with more or less editorial intervention, sometimes extending beyond formal considerations of organisation and presentation to effect the very content of the texts themselves.⁶ Viewed in this light, the *Prison Notebooks* are a paradigmatically 'Marxist' text.

⁵ Buttigieg 1992, p. 62.

⁶ The paradigmatic example of this is, of course, Engels's editorial interventions in the text of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, destined to create profound confusions in the subsequent Marxist traditions. Cf. Labica 1987.

The attempted 'completion' of Marx's project, either theoretically or 'practically', has of course been one of the dominant tendencies in all of those projects that have affiliated to the Marxist tradition (and even some that expressly repudiated it). In the case of Gramsci, efforts to organise the notebooks, in order to find an 'authentic' or at least 'representative' Gramsci, has given rise to various and contradictory forms of 'Gramscianism'. Often, these attempts have adopted the 'reconstructive' strategy of a totalising interpretation, seeking to wed Gramsci to one or another political project, more or less coherently, in a way more or less faithful to Gramsci's own commitments: Gramsci as 'Leninist', as anti-Stalinist, as post-Marxist and all the intermediary permutations. Stuart Hall's interpretation of Gramsci, for instance, built upon earlier 'New-Left' interpretations and attempted to appropriate Gramsci for a particular current then struggling for hegemony in the fledgling institution of cultural studies; Laclau's and Mouffe's Gramsci figured as a precursor to a radical-democratic politics that had outgrown the myopia of the Marxist tradition. Other strategies have taken the more limited form of selections made according to the criteria of academic research programmes and divisions: Gramsci as political theorist, as sociologist, as philosopher, as literary critic and so forth. Yet another approach has sought to extend certain key Gramscian categories and insights into fields only briefly sighted by Gramsci himself, or to 'update' his thought for contemporary purposes: the success of neo-Gramscian perspectives in international relations is perhaps the most visible of these approaches. Sometimes these engagements have been productive and creative developments of the original project, their selective and sometimes even partisan nature revealing hitherto un-noted dimensions of Gramsci's thought. Alberto Burgio's recent study of the historiography of the *Prison Notebooks*, for example, successfully fulfils its intention 'to free this book [of the history of the crisis of bourgeois modernity] from the prison of notes' to which both carceral conditions and the interdisciplinary nature of Gramsci's research project had consigned it.⁷ Other attempts, however, have amounted to little more than a second incarceration: a certain tradition of interpretation associated with the culture of the former PCI, particularly in its Eurocommunist guise, is just as guilty of a posthumous miscarriage of justice in this sense

⁷ Burgio 2002, p. 3.

as the most banal 'post-Marxist' readings served up by the mainstream of contemporary Anglophone social sciences and humanities.

For a reader such as Frank Jablonka, articulating the implicit practice of many of Gramsci's more recent readers, the fragmentary nature of the *Prison Notebooks'* literary form is precisely the element that imparts a continuing fertility and relevance to them. It allows, according to Jablonka, an 'openness of reading' and 'plurality of interpretations', giving 'scope for creative and critical further thought and deployment, a reconstruction and deconstruction, without feeling oneself forced all the time to ask about an essence of the pure and true doctrine'.⁸ Jablonka goes so far as to argue that Gramsci's 'écriture-process in prison' produced, albeit unintentionally, a 'poststructuralism [...] *avant la lettre*' which invites us to a 'rhizomatic reading of the *Prison Notebooks*'.⁹ The seemingly disjointed nature of Gramsci's meditations could be retrospectively read as a series of fragments which Gramsci shored up against his ruin, or even as a paradigmatic performance of poststructuralist theories of hypertextuality and the indeterminacy of meaning. The *Prison Notebooks* would thus become, following Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, 'a toolbox', a 'plateau' of a 'rhizome' that each reader can construct according to their own disposition or the needs imposed upon them by the conjuncture. Just as the meditation upon certain central formulations of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Croce and Machiavelli was one of the most productive features of Gramsci's carceral 'spiritual exercises', so the contemporary reader is invited to select particular maxims from the *Prison Notebooks* and elaborate their perspectives in perhaps entirely different and sometimes wholly unrelated contexts and directions.

2.2. A theoretical toolbox?

While this reading captures something of the unusual productivity of Gramsci's intellectual practice, of the folding over of concepts and their emergence and development in contexts different from those in which they were first elaborated, it is ultimately inadequate for comprehending the progression and development of Gramsci's thought considered as an integral project. For the

⁸ Jablonka 1998, p. 24.

⁹ Jablonka 1998, pp. 27–8.

Prison Notebooks are not a collection of disjointed aphorisms similar to the meditations of the late Wittgenstein or Nietzsche's brilliantly enigmatic imitations of Heraclitus. Despite first appearances, they have a fundamental coherence and respond to specific questions posed in a particular conjuncture. This 'situatedness' left its mark upon the very literary form and structure of the *Prison Notebooks*, which thus must be grasped in their specificity before the import of their contents can be accurately assessed. This is not to refuse *a priori* the many fertile and useful fields of investigation that have focused upon one or another of Gramsci's formulations. This will continue to play an important part in the reception of Gramsci and thus constitute one of the signs of his 'actuality'. It is, however, to suggest that such a decontextualised reading risks dissolving the search for Gramsci's 'organic concepts' into so many moments of indeterminate postmodern *jouissance* or, what is the same thing, instrumentalising his thought for purposes wholly other, and sometimes directly antithetical, to the fundamental commitments of his intellectual and political practice.¹⁰

For such a method of 'relaxed' reading has by no means been limited to the moment of postmodernity. In fact, the history of the interpretation of the *Prison Notebooks* provides a clear reminder that hermeneutically naïve reading strategies that neglect the discipline imposed by the historical determinateness and specificity of a text most often finish affirming, implicitly and platonically, that one can only recognise that which one has already known. Beginning with the attempts accompanying the first edition of the *Prison Notebooks* to reduce the distance between Gramsci's 'Philosophy of Praxis' and the 'Diamat' orthodoxy then hegemonic in the international Communist movement, via the PCI's strategy from the late 1950s onwards of a distinctively national 'Italian road to socialism', to the brief season of Eurocommunism in the 1970s, and beyond to more recent attempts to depict Gramsci as a forerunner of contemporary rhetorics of postcommunism and post-Marxism, Gramsci's legacy has been continuously subjected to 'rhizomatic' readings *avant la lettre*. Deformed, distorted and 'over-determined' by the perceived needs of particular political conjunctures, Gramsci's work has been invoked to justify diverse and even diametrically opposed political strategies.¹¹ These instrumentalising readings

¹⁰ Cf. Mordenti 2007.

¹¹ The most comprehensive account of Gramsci's reception in Italy is Liguori 1996 and 2005; Frosini 2007 also provides a critical survey of the last thirty years of Gramscian scholarship.

have been made possible precisely due to the choice to focus upon individual synchronic ‘plateaux’ or pregnant formulations instead of undertaking the much more difficult task of ‘the diachronic reconstruction of [Gramsci’s] carceral reflection’ in its hesitancies, reformulations, simultaneous unity and contradiction and incompleteness.¹²

2.3. ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’

The first extended engagement within Anglophone Marxism with Gerrattana’s critical edition, Perry Anderson’s ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, aimed to combat this travesty of Gramsci’s legacy. Originally published as the lead article in the 100th issue of *New Left Review* (of which Anderson was editor at the time), it still remains today among the most well known and influential of all studies of Gramsci in English. Appearing at the time of an intensive reception of Gramsci in the Anglophone leftist academy, it established a certain ‘tone’ regarding the political import of the *Prison Notebooks* that has strongly influenced later engagements—significantly, even when those studies have valorised political positions different from those professed by Anderson in the 1970s. Paul Blackledge, for example, while dissenting from Anderson’s conclusions, could nevertheless still recently nominate it as ‘possibly the most sophisticated political critique of the *Prison Notebooks*’.¹³ In this, he merely followed a more widespread judgement, as evidenced by Gregory Elliott’s assessment, from a different political position, of ‘the brilliance of its dissection of [the] *Prison Notebooks*’ and ‘its remarkable qualities as an essay in intellectual history’.¹⁴ Anderson’s use of original sources and the newly released critical edition, in a provincial theoretical culture not usually noted for the cosmopolitanism of its references and debates, coupled with the breathtaking range, gave this essay a certain authority or ‘cultural capital’ that has not quickly depreciated. Furthermore, the political focus of its analysis and the revolutionary spirit of its conclusions gave it a particular resonance amongst those who could be referred to in shorthand as ‘political’ or ‘activist’ Marxists, as distinct from their

¹² Frosini and Liguori 2004, p. 9.

¹³ Blackledge 2004, p. x.

¹⁴ Elliott 1998, pp. 31, 118.

‘academic’ comrades. ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ still enjoys a high prestige on the Anglophone far Left, whatever doubts are otherwise expressed about Anderson’s political evolution, his current Olympian ‘realism’ in particular. The result is a widespread continuing acceptance, if not of all its specific details, then at least of its substantive conclusions and assumptions regarding Gramsci’s thought and the nature of the *Prison Notebooks* as a project, within Anglophone Marxism as a whole.

Many of Anderson’s presuppositions and conclusions are very close to those of Althusser’s critique in *Reading ‘Capital’*. Indeed, in a certain sense, the two readings are complementary—which is not to say that their presuppositions are identical. Rather, the one expresses in a philosophical register concerns expressed in more strictly political terms in the other: both critiques, that is, focus upon the capacity of Gramsci’s thought to contribute to a coherent revolutionary politics. Both interpretations of Gramsci’s thought, however, despite their continuing influence, can begin to seem more problematic after a close and extended engagement with the text of the critical edition, including its ‘productive incompleteness’. Anderson’s influential study, just as Althusser’s influential theses, is thus long overdue for reassessment. Due to its influence and prestige, an extended and detailed reconstructive analysis of ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ will also allow us to raise questions of more general import regarding some of the dominant received images of Gramsci. As we shall see, these images often have less to do with Gramsci as such than with the history of instrumentalisations that have deformed his legacy.

In a reading highly overdetermined by the international political conjuncture and national theoretical fashions, and not a little influenced by Anderson’s reckoning of accounts with his own political and theoretical past, he began with an explicit ‘warning against all facile or complacent readings of Gramsci’.¹⁵ ‘No Marxist work is so difficult to read accurately and systematically’,

¹⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 6. On the one hand, as rapidly became apparent, Anderson’s reading of Gramsci involved as a central element a not-so-coded critique of ‘Eurocommunism’ (Berlinguer had ‘officially’ announced the new strategy earlier in the year, on 3 June 1976). The same issue of *NLR* included an interview with Mandel that was also highly critical of the new initiative (Mandel 1976). On the other hand, ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ represented a definitive repudiation of the ‘reformist’ strategy—in effect, a variant of the focus upon civil society as the decisive locus of socialist agitation that he now condemned—that Anderson had argued was appropriate and possible within the British social formation in the early 1960s, before the radicalising effects of the latter half of the decade (cf. Anderson 1965). Anderson himself acknowledged the

he noted, 'because of the peculiar conditions of its composition'.¹⁶ On the one hand, Gramsci had needed to work towards 'radically new concepts in an old vocabulary, designed for other purposes and times [particularly those of Croce or Machiavelli], which overlaid and deflected their meaning'.¹⁷ On the other hand, Anderson argued that the 'atrocious conditions, with a Fascist censor scrutinizing everything that he produced', prompted Gramsci to adopt 'a voluntary disguise' in the form of abbreviations, codewords and euphemisms, in order 'to evade his jailers'. 'The result is a work censored twice over: its spaces, ellipses, contradictions, disorders, allusions, repetitions are the result of this uniquely adverse process of composition'. Seemingly invoking the principles of an Althusserian symptomatic reading, Anderson continued to argue that 'the reconstruction of the hidden order within these hieroglyphs remains to be done [...] a systematic work of recovery is needed to discover what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of his thought.'¹⁸

The purpose of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', then, invoking the philological gains of the critical edition as its foundation and condition of possibility, was 'to analyze the precise forms and functions of Gramsci's concept of hegemony', considered as one of the central categories of the *Prison Notebooks*, 'and to assess their internal coherence as a unified discourse'. It was 'an attempt to fix with greater precision what Gramsci said and meant in his captivity' and to reconstruct 'the true theoretical context of his work'.¹⁹ Anderson's point of departure was two texts outlining the political conjuncture to which, according to Anderson, Gramsci's concept of hegemony was designed as a response: his famous remarks on the different political structures in East and West and the different revolutionary strategies appropriate to them,

errors of his youth in a footnote in the essay under consideration (Anderson 1976a, p. 27). A further overdetermination was also evident: a collective research programme published for the most part in *NLR* into the nature of bourgeois democracy that intersected with heated debates across the entire spectrum of the (European, but not only) Left. As Paul Blackledge notes, 'in these essays, Anderson and his colleagues attempted to excavate the structure of bourgeois democracy so as to be better placed to aid in its overthrow. These attempts to comprehend the structure of bourgeois democracy were, moreover, written in the context of a wider debate across the revolutionary Left on this question.' (Blackledge 2004, p. 76.)

¹⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Anderson 1976a, p. 7.

solidifying into the famous juxtaposition between ‘war of manoeuvre’ in the East and ‘war of position’ in the West. ‘These texts represent the most cogent synthesis of the essential terms of Gramsci’s theoretical universe, which elsewhere are dispersed and scattered throughout the Notebooks’,²⁰ Anderson argued. Though they did not ‘immediately broach the problem of hegemony’, ‘they assemble[d] all the necessary elements for its emergence into a controlling position in his discourse’.²¹

2.4. 1 + 1 = 3

Anderson discerned two distinct characterisations in the *Prison Notebooks* of the relation between civil society and the state in the Western-European capitalist social formations, in each case formed by means of a contrast with the structures prevailing in the East. In a first moment, Gramsci had characterised the relationship between State and civil society, in the ‘advanced States’, as what Anderson later called a ‘balanced relationship’:²² ‘The superstructures of civil society are like the trench-systems of modern warfare’,²³ ‘resistant to the catastrophic “incursions” of the immediate economic element (crises, depressions, and so on)’, protecting the state from immediate attack. In a second move, Gramsci reversed the order of the terms: rather than being a high command surrounded by the trenches of civil society, the state in the West now took the place of civil society in the first version, as an external buffer zone behind which lay an inner core.

In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there was a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks.²⁴

²⁰ Anderson 1976a, pp. 7–8.

²¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 8.

²² Anderson 1976a, p. 12.

²³ Q 13, § 24; *SPN*, p. 235; written in 1932–3.

²⁴ Q 7, § 16; *SPN*, p. 238; written in November–December 1930. Anderson argued that, in such a conception, ‘civil society thereby becomes a central core or inner redoubt, of which the State is merely an external and dispensable surface’ (Anderson 1976a, p. 10). No such superfluousness is suggested by Gramsci’s metaphor: an inner core only

From these characterisations, Anderson then deduced common elements in both models of the Western social formations, united in their distinction from the structures of the East, despite significant differences between them.

	<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
<i>Civil Society</i>	Primordial/Gelatinous	Developed/Sturdy
<i>State</i>	Preponderant	Balanced
<i>Strategy</i>	Manoeuvre	Position
<i>Tempo</i>	Speed	Protraction

Finally, as an extension of these positions—or as he defined it, a ‘semantic shift’²⁵—Anderson noted a third version, a sort of addendum, in which the metaphor of concentric circles of the second model was taken to its logical conclusion. Preceded by an historical narrative of ‘the massive expansion of the State from the late nineteenth century onwards’,²⁶ here the state—or rather, ‘political society’—was subsumed along with civil society within what Gramsci characterised as the ‘general notion of the State’. This included elements ‘which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that the State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony armoured with coercion)’.²⁷ According to Anderson, this definition exhibited a tendency towards the identification of the state and civil society, eventually consolidated in Gramsci’s assertion that ‘in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same’.²⁸

Strictly taken, these three characterisations of the advanced capitalist state—civil society distinct from and surrounding the state, the state distinct from and surrounding civil society, political society and civil society fused in a general notion of the state—were incompatible with each other. All three, however, albeit in different ways, had as a logical conclusion the promotion of ‘war

becomes such by means of its relation to its exterior boundary, a boundary necessary not only to *defend* its holy of holies but also to *define* it as such. Properly understood, Gramsci’s metaphor in this second version suggests that the state is the *necessary* exterior of an articulated structure whose centre is civil society, a symmetrical reversal of what Anderson argued was Gramsci’s first version.

²⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

²⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 12.

²⁷ Q 6, §88; *SPN*, p. 263; written in December 1931.

²⁸ Q 13, §18; *SPN*, p. 160; written in 1932–3. The Italian text referenced by Anderson reads as follows: ‘nella realtà effettuale società civile e Stato si identificano’. I will return to the significance of this passage shortly.

of position' in civil society as the most appropriate strategy of working-class politics in the advanced capitalist West. The 'war of manoeuvre', relict of a bygone era in the West even if it had still been legitimate in the East prior to the Russian Revolution, was reduced to a tactical role within the new strategic perspective. Furthermore, in one of the passages assigned by Anderson to the third paradigm, Gramsci argued that 'the formula of "civil hegemony"' superseded 'the Forty-Eightist formula of "Permanent Revolution"' in the same way that the 'war of movement increasingly becomes war of position' in military science, as 'the internal and international organisational relations of the State become more complex and massive' after 1870.²⁹ Gramsci had further specified: 'This question is posed for the modern States, but not for the backward countries or for the colonies, where forms which elsewhere have been superseded and have become anachronistic are still in vigour'.³⁰ Completing the circle was Gramsci's identification, in a text from the second paradigm, of war of position with the 'formula' of the united front, which he understood as founded upon Lenin's recognition that 'a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only possible form in the West'.³¹ Thus Anderson could suggest that there was 'a loop': 'Civil Hegemony = War of Position = United Front',³² with the middle term playing the role of the mediator that permitted the identification. How could three so different characterisations of the Western capitalist state have issued in the same strategy of 'civil' hegemony for its revolutionary overthrow?

2.5. Detours via detours

In order to clarify these antinomies, Anderson proposed to descend into the hidden abode of politico-theoretical production. Although he stressed on numerous occasions that the central terms of his study were dictated by Gramsci's own incomplete conceptual structure (philology seemingly being invoked in the sense of textual limitation), 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', in

²⁹ Q 13, §7; *SPN*, p. 243.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 237; written in November–December 1930.

³² Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

actual fact, proceeded in a more expansive mode. Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bordiga, Althusser, Poulantzas, Miliband and Mandel were all called on different occasions as witnesses to the development of the concept of hegemony and related terms. The analysis of the antinomies contained in Gramsci's own elliptical formulations thus regularly gave way to an excavation of their theoretical and political precedents and contemporary reverberations, before returning with the resources thus gained to continue the task of philological elucidation, strictly understood. In this sense, Anderson's essay reproduced something of the fragmentary structure of the very text that it proposed to analyse: detours via detours, a labyrinth within a labyrinth.

Not a few readers have been dazzled by this maze of mirrors, or even daunted by the depth and breath of its references. The most extensive critique of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', by Gianni Francioni (unfortunately never translated into English), expressed frustration at the 'one step forward, two steps backward' logic of Anderson's reconstructive strategy. Francioni even went so far as to refuse to follow the order of Anderson's arguments, arguing that 'it is not possible to approve as point of departure the two notes chosen by Anderson in his essay, and consequently it is not possible to follow the order of his discourse'.³³ As he correctly pointed out, the two initial texts quoted by Anderson³⁴ 'represent an advanced phase of elaboration' of Gramsci's theory.³⁵ Anderson had not, as we have seen, suggested that these texts were Gramsci's own point of departure, nominating them instead as 'the most cogent synthesis of the essential terms of Gramsci's theoretical universe'.³⁶ For Francioni, however, this was precisely the problem: as advanced phases in Gramsci's project, they were like the tips of icebergs, deceptive not so much in what they showed as in what they concealed. It was thus 'necessary to emphasise their synthetic character by beginning with chronologically prior notes',³⁷ in order to reconstruct the order of the discourse in which they emerged and in which they found their full significance. Otherwise, without noting the particular constellations of meaning and reference through which Gramsci's concepts passed on their journey to these latter phases, the likelihood of

³³ Francioni 1984, p. 154.

³⁴ I.e. Q 13, §24 and Q 7, §16.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Anderson 1976a, pp. 7–8.

³⁷ Ibid.

misinterpretation increased. It became possible to ascribe central significance to what were in fact marginal formulations, or to nominate a contradiction between two statements that were, in reality, united by another (un-noted) theoretical perspective. Most dangerously, not a great distance lay between Anderson's denomination of these later positions as 'the most cogent synthesis of the essential terms' of Gramsci's thought and a reading according to which they represented the finally manifested 'essence' of the preceding researches, according to a familiar Hegelian logic. As we will see, this is precisely one of the risks of Anderson's reconstructive strategy, which can be misunderstood as ascribing a determining status to these texts, rather than 'synthetic priority', as if they were the hard core of a problematic, or a criterion according to which subsequent 'variations' could be noted.

This philological perspective problematises the very possibility of a precise textual reconstruction, to an extent that should not be underestimated.³⁸ Although 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' attempted to proceed with an uncommon respect for the text Gramsci actually wrote, the terms of its reconstructive method ran the risk of producing a 'rhizomatic' reading of the *Prison Notebooks*. In a first move, Anderson focused upon particular 'plateaux' whose themes accorded closely with his own research interests at the time: namely, the lineages of state-forms, from the perspective of the specificity of the West in its distinction from the East.³⁹ In a second moment rapidly following upon the first, however, he argued that these also represented the 'essential terms of Gramsci's theoretical universe'. At first sight, the assertion appears to be self-evident and uncontentious: specifying the differences between the lands in which the proletariat had come to power and those in which it had been rebuffed had been one of the central concerns for Eastern and Western Marxists alike following the Russian Revolution, and even more so following the defeat of the revolutionary wave in Germany and central Europe.

For the 'last' Lenin, in particular, this had been an overriding concern. As Gramsci remembered on several occasions in the *Prison Notebooks*,

³⁸ Francioni's critique does not seem to have diminished Anderson's confidence in the methodological validity and substantive correctness of his essay. As late as 1992, he wrote in the forward to *Zone of Engagement* that 'the historical method and findings of this essay seem to me to have lost none of their validity' (Anderson 1992, p. xi).

³⁹ Cf. Anderson 1974a and 1974b.

in 1921, treating questions of organisation, Ilich [i.e. Lenin] wrote and said (more or less): we have not known how to 'translate' our language into the European languages.⁴⁰

For Gramsci himself, many years prior to his imprisonment, the juxtaposition between East and West had been a determining perspective. For a period in the early 1920s, he had hesitated, along with the rest of the Italian leadership, in accepting the Comintern's recommendation of the politics of the united front, as a foreign imposition that would not take on Italian soil. By the time of the *Prison Notebooks* at the latest, however, Gramsci's researches were dominated by a fundamentally different problematic. In a certain sense, he had accepted the Leninist research programme so thoroughly that he had dispensed with the conjunctural insight that gave rise to it. The texts quoted by Anderson were not the 'most cogent synthesis' of Gramsci's project but more a remembrance of things past, recalling the impetus that had set him upon the path of his carceral researches but that had soon been conceptually superseded.⁴¹ Reconstruction on the basis of them could not but fail to notice the decisive new internationalist perspective that orientated Gramsci's researches into the specificity of the Western social formations, taken in their unity and internal distinction.

Despite the frustrations expressed by Francioni, it nevertheless remains important to follow Anderson's argument in detail, 'reconstructing the reconstruction'. Such an approach will allow us to subject this interpretation to the detailed critical scrutiny that befits its influence. Furthermore, it will enable us to problematise some of its most significant methodological and substantive presuppositions and findings. Written shortly after the appearance of the 1975

⁴⁰ Q 11, §46; *FSPN*, p. 306. Lenin's statement was actually made in 1922, during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, referring to the formulation of theses on the united front in 1921. Cf. Lenin 1964, Volume 33, p. 430; *Kommunistische Internationale* 1923, p. 229. For a more detailed discussion of this conjuncture, cf. Section 6.2.7.

⁴¹ This hypothesis is most easily demonstrated by noting the time that elapsed from the beginning of Gramsci's notebooks and the re-emergence of the theme of the distinction between East and West in Q 7, §16, written in November–December 1930: over twenty-one months from the beginning of the first notebook on 9 February 1929. Before returning to this motif of the early 1920s, the 'mature' Gramsci had conducted extensive researches into the histories of the Western states, Italy and France in particular. As we shall see in Chapter Five, Gramsci became convinced of the distinctiveness of the role of civil society in the Western social formations—and the need to forge new categories to comprehend it—due to his concrete empirical researches, conducted within a research programme first outlined by the Third and Fourth Congresses of the Third International, in an international perspective.

critical edition, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' necessarily laboured under the 'anxiety of influence' of earlier interpretations that had been based upon the thematic edition.⁴² Arguably, such interpretations still overdetermined Anderson's effort to reconstruct 'what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of this thought' to a much greater extent than seemed to be the case.⁴³ A less overdetermined reading today (or rather, a reading overdetermined by consciousness of the very different theoretico-political coordinates of the contemporary conjuncture) can help us to avoid such limitations. Furthermore, recent philological studies of the *Prison Notebooks* now enable us to attempt to comprehend with greater accuracy the 'determinate meaning within the architecture' of Gramsci's work of particular concepts.⁴⁴ Above all, the gains of Gramscian scholarship in the intervening period now provide us with a richer picture of development of Gramsci's carceral project, necessitating a revision of Anderson's overall assessment while confirming some of his individual analyses.

2.6. The emergence of hegemony ...

Undoubtedly the most significant of Anderson's analyses regarded the development of the concept of *gegemoniya* in the debates of Russian Social Democracy prior to the revolution. Herein lay one of the great merits of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci': it stressed the revolutionary-Marxist heritage of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, at precisely the moment when Eurocommunist appropriation and (vulgarised) assimilation to Anglophone academia threatened to efface it. 'Nothing reveals the lack of ordinary scholarship from which Gramsci's legacy has suffered more than [the] widespread illusion [that the concept of hegemony was Gramsci's own invention]',⁴⁵ Anderson justly noted, before demonstrating its classical-Marxist pedigree. If this selective focus precluded an exploration of the other, at least equally important sources

⁴² Gregory Elliott claims that 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' was based upon an unpublished manuscript composed in 1970, entitled 'State and Revolution in the West', though he does not provide a discussion of sources or revisions to different manuscripts (Elliott 1998, p. 31, p. 77).

⁴³ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 15.

of Gramsci's distinctive use of the term, it nevertheless provided a powerful antidote to the juxtaposition of Gramsci's legacy with that of the early Third International, encapsulated in the notion of an 'either/or' between '(civil) hegemony' and 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. This view was just as fashionable in certain continental Eurocommunist milieux as it was in the Anglophone reception.⁴⁶ As Anderson emphasised, the two concepts, in their original usage, were not opposed but complementary, situated on a continuum of experiences in the same theoretical and political culture to which they gave different forms of expression in different conjunctures.⁴⁷

Anderson did not, however, reduce Gramsci's concept to its heritage or deny the decisive new elements that he introduced to the results of the Russian debates. As his subsequent argument demonstrated, the concept inherited by Gramsci during his participation in the debates of the early years of the Third International had already been significantly renovated, in ways that had been unthinkable in pre-Revolutionary debates. According to Anderson,

after the revolution, [the term hegemony] fell into relative disuse in the Bolshevik Party—for one very good reason. Forged to theorize the role of the working class in a bourgeois revolution, it was rendered inoperative by the advent of a socialist revolution.⁴⁸

According to this narrative, it only returned to currency at the Fourth Congress of the Third International, in 1922, at which Gramsci was in attendance.⁴⁹ 'For what seems to be the first time', Anderson argued, the term hegemony was

⁴⁶ This tendency was later radicalised into the thesis that Gramsci was a harbinger of post-Marxism and his concept of hegemony a point of departure for a radical-democratic slide back towards liberalism. The conversion of an unrepentant Communist militant who died in a Fascist prison cell into a harmless gadfly is surely among the most bizarre and distasteful episodes of recent intellectual fashion. Harman 2007 provides a trenchant historical and political critique of this tendency; cf. also Ives 2005.

⁴⁷ Anderson 1976a, pp. 15–18.

⁴⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Strictly taken, this assertion is incorrect. As Buci-Glucksmann emphasises, 'contrary to what is maintained in certain rather hasty surveys, this notion was well established in Marxist usage throughout the Third International. It can be found in Lenin's writings both before and after 1917. It is also to be found frequently in the work of Béla Kun, Varga, Stalin and especially Bukharin' (Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 7). It is true that there is a relative (and significant) absence of the term 'hegemony' in the index of the English edition of Lenin's *Collected Works*: there, 'Hegemony of the proletariat' is reduced to a brief sub-section of the entry 'Revolution, bourgeois-democratic, in Russia, February 1917' (p. 506), though there are extensive main entries for 'Leading role of proletariat' (pp. 310–11) and 'Alliance between the proletariat and

extended to the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat, if the former succeeded in confining the latter to a corporate role by inducing it to accept a division between political and economic struggles in its class practice.⁵⁰

It was from these rhetorical declarations, scant in their theoretical content, rather than the pre-Revolutionary debates, Anderson argued, that Gramsci's own treatment of the concept of hegemony 'descends directly'.⁵¹

2.7. ... and its deformation

Yet a further progressive transformation of the concept of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* was noted, occurring in three stages.

In the first instance, the term refers [...] to *the class alliance of the proletariat* with other exploited groups, above all the peasantry, in a common struggle against the oppression of capital.⁵²

The text quoted to support this characterisation was Q 13, § 18, from 1932–3. This definition was perfectly in accord, of course, with the primary meaning of hegemony in pre-Revolutionary Russian debates, signifying the leading role of the proletariat among subaltern classes struggling against the Tsarist régime. In a second moment, Gramsci distinguished such a leading (hegemonic) role of the proletariat in relation to its class allies from the dictatorship it needed to

peasantry' (pp. 30–3). Cf. Institute of Marxism-Leninism 1980. Lenin in fact more often uses the terms 'direction [*rukovodstvo*]' and 'directing/leading [*rukovoditel*]' than the word 'hegemony [*gegemoniya*]'. Bobbio pointed this out in his famous intervention at the 1967 Gramsci conference in Cagliari on the thirtieth anniversary of Gramsci's death (Bobbio 1990, p. 59). Curiously, Anderson accepted the most contested claims of Bobbio's study (in particular, regarding Gramsci's supposed exclusion of the economic from civil society, due to Hegelian inspiration), but neglected to note this, perhaps Bobbio's most philologically valid finding. He thus ended up objecting to Gramsci's 'elision' of 'direction' with 'hegemony' as a novel and unwarranted addition to the Bolshevik vocabulary (Anderson 1976a, p. 21). As we will see in Section 6.2.3., the situation is much more complex and overdetermined than the mere presence or absence of a word; it ultimately concerns Gramsci's very distinctive position in the debates over Lenin's legacy in the 1920s, against the 'official' interpretation of the concept of hegemony given by Stalin.

⁵⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 18.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Anderson 1976a, p. 19.

exercise over and against its class enemies. Here, the relevant text was held to be Q 13, § 23, also written in 1932–3. Again, this was entirely consonant with the concept's original connotations. However—and here the plot thickened—the perspectives that Gramsci had inherited from his direct participation in the early years of the Third International were slowly but surely distorted as they travelled through the maze of mirrors of the *Prison Notebooks*. For, while resolutions regarding bourgeois hegemony formulated by and for an audience of international revolutionaries had perforce to name their specific references and attend to empirical detail, dry theoretical abstractions being expunged by the cut and thrust of political debate, Gramsci's texts were subject to a very different type of 'revolutionary discipline'. The famous self-censorship to which he was compelled by imprisonment, adopted as a necessary subterfuge in order to write at all, had as an unintended consequence the emergence of a 'desituated' mode of discourse that subtly deformed his key categories.⁵³

The very *form* of the prison writing was insensibly to shift the significance and function of the concept, in their context as a whole. For the characteristic medium in which Gramsci presented his ideas was that of a protocol of general axioms of political sociology, with 'floating' referents—sometimes allusively specified by class or régime or epoch, but equally often ambiguously evocative of several possible exemplars. This procedure, foreign to any other Marxist, was of course dictated to Gramsci by the need to lull the vigilance of the censor. Its result, however, was a constant indeterminacy of focus, in which the bourgeoisie and the proletariat can often alternate simultaneously as the hypothetical subjects of the same passage—whenever, in fact, Gramsci writes in the abstract of a 'dominant class'.⁵⁴

Seemingly innocent and occasional lack of precise referents, in its turn, had 'serious consequences for [Gramsci's] thought: for it induced', according to Anderson, 'the unexamined premise that the structural positions of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in their respective revolutions and their successive States, were historically equivalent'.⁵⁵

⁵³ Anderson 1976a, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

This not only led, in a third formulation dating from 1934, to a ‘transition to a much wider theory of hegemony than had ever been imagined in Russia’⁵⁶—extended from what Anderson characterised as ‘the perspectives of the working class in a bourgeois revolution against a feudal order, to the mechanisms of bourgeois rule over the working class in a stabilized capitalist society’.⁵⁷ It also resulted in a confusion between the forms of bourgeois class rule and proletarian hegemony. For hegemony was originally a theory forged to theorise and guide the proletariat’s alliance with other subaltern classes; but, now, alongside this original usage, Gramsci’s third and seemingly paradigmatic model also ‘employed the concept of hegemony for a *differential analysis of the structures of bourgeois power in the West*’.⁵⁸ Thus, perspectives and conclusions proper only to the forms of political organisation of one class, their distinctive modes of combat and rule, could be surreptitiously transferred to the other, mediated by the now generic term of hegemony uniting them. The strictly incommensurable status of bourgeois and proletarian hegemony (and the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘proletarian’ revolution) was thereby annulled, potentially leading to the collapse of the latter into the former. Politically, the result of these subtle slides and shifts was to open the way to strategic perspectives for the working-class movement that did not take cognisance of its specificity and unprecedented historical responsibilities; theoretically, Anderson wrote (in a period whose politico-intellectual landscape included not only Eurocommunism but also Foucault and Deleuze), it produced ‘a set of generic maxims in principle applicable to either [bourgeois or proletarian hegemony] [...] an apparently formal sequence of propositions about the nature of power in history’.⁵⁹

Francioni provided the following useful commentary on this seemingly teleological sequence.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Whether or not the springtime of such generic theories of power had led Anderson to misjudge Gramsci’s own position—in effect, projecting the concerns of the late 1970s onto texts written in the early 1930s—must necessarily remain conjecture. At the least, one could note that Anderson’s descriptions of Gramsci’s series of dialectical oppositions as being ‘valid for any historical epoch: force/consent, domination/hegemony, violence/civilization’ (Anderson 1976a, p. 21) would seem better directed against ahistorical abstractions than influential in the general theoretical culture than against the concreteness of Gramsci’s analysis.

This *metamorphosis in three stages* of the concept of hegemony is not objectively verified by the text of the *Prison Notebooks*. The demonstration is easy: if one wants to individuate the first appearance of the formulations that Anderson notes in order to justify his thesis of the ‘three moments’ of Gramscian hegemony, and therefore one doesn’t stop at the second version of these texts (the only versions that Anderson cites) but traces and dates their first versions in the *Prison Notebooks*, [...] one arrives at this paradoxical result: Anderson’s *first moment*, in Q 13, §18 (able to be dated to approximately between the middle of 1932 and 1933), has a first version in Q 4, §38, which is from October 1930; the *second moment* (Q 13, §23, perhaps written in the second half of 1933) has a first version in Q 9, §40, in June 1932; finally, the *third moment*, in Q 19, §24, is a revision, done in 1934, of the A text Q 1, §44, written at the beginning of 1930.⁶⁰ Comparison between the first and second versions does not reveal substantial variations. Therefore, staying with the only notes cited by Anderson, the third moment should be in reality the first, the first should be the second, the second should be the third. There is still, however the question of the ‘mediation’ between one meaning and the other of hegemony, which is supposed to be undertaken by that ‘series of generic maxims’, derived from Machiavelli, that Anderson traces to Q 13, §24. However, Q 13, §24 (written in the same period as the already cited Q 13, §23 [i.e., the second half of 1933]) is the second version of Q 8, §36 (February 1932). How can a text of February 1932 mediate the transition to a formulation from the beginning of 1930 [i.e., Q 1, §44]? This is not philological pedantry: it is a case of following the development of Gramsci’s thought, without omissions or extrapolations. At this point it is possible to observe that, in the delineation of the problematic of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*, what Anderson sees as the point of arrival of Gramsci’s ‘amplification’ of the concept constitutes vice versa one of its points of departure.⁶¹

As we will see in Chapter Six, the particular nature of that point of departure constitutes perhaps Gramsci’s most novel addition to the Marxist vocabulary

⁶⁰ Francioni refers here to the classification of individual notes in Gerratana’s critical edition: ‘A texts’ are first drafts; ‘B texts’ are notes of which only one version exists; and ‘C texts’ are the second versions of ‘A texts’. Cf. Gerratana 1975, p. xxxvi.

⁶¹ Francioni 1984, pp. 160–1.

of hegemony. At one and the same time, it represents both his greatest distance from and deepest fidelity to the Bolshevik experience.

2.8. Three versions of hegemony in the West

Nevertheless, Anderson proceeded to analyse the different formulations of such a generic theory of hegemony applied to ‘the structures of bourgeois power in the West’,⁶² in terms of the ‘three distinct versions of the relations between Gramsci’s key concepts’. These yielded three distinct versions of the nature of the advanced bourgeois state. His elucidation of Gramsci’s positions was interspersed with comparisons and contrasts with contemporary debates, according to the noted analogical method. Keeping within our own philological limits, however, we can leave these elective affinities to one side for the moment. More important for an analytical reconstruction of Anderson’s reading of Gramsci is to note that this second delineation of the three distinct versions of the Western state and the texts in which they were thought to be encapsulated were, in their turn, themselves distinct from the three versions and texts that Anderson had outlined at the beginning of his study. In the ‘enigmatic mosaic’ of citations from the *Prison Notebooks* ‘laboriously assembled’ in ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, the terms of analysis threatened to undergo a ‘slippage’.⁶³ As we will see, this had serious consequences for Anderson’s substantive conclusions.

Anderson had earlier characterised Gramsci’s first model as one of a ‘balanced relationship’,⁶⁴ in which ‘the State contrasts with civil society’,⁶⁵ citing the text Q 13, §24 to support this characterisation. Now, however, he claimed that Gramsci’s first model—‘the most important for the ulterior destiny of his work’⁶⁶—involved ‘the preponderance of civil society over the State in the West’.⁶⁷ He cited Q 7, §16 (erroneously claimed to be ‘the initial passage cited

⁶² Anderson 1976a, p. 25.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

in this essay')⁶⁸ as the central text of this model.⁶⁹ This subtle shift allowed Anderson to radicalise his earlier confusion about the non-dispensable status of the exterior term in the metaphor of Gramsci's second model (the state as 'outer ditch' to the inner fortress of civil society), and to transfer it to the first. Now, the state appeared as the unnecessary 'absent centre' encircled by an effectively 'autonomous' civil society. For, if the West, in contradistinction to the East, was structurally characterised by the preponderance of civil society over the state—not their dialectical interpenetration, but the preponderance of one over the other—this could then

be equated with the predominance of 'hegemony' over 'coercion' as the fundamental mode of bourgeois power in advanced capitalism. Since hegemony pertains to civil society, and civil society prevails over the State, it is the cultural ascendancy of the ruling class that essentially ensures the stability of the capitalist order. For in Gramsci's usage here, hegemony means the ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent.⁷⁰

Thus it could appear that Anderson had found a textual foundation in the *Prison Notebooks* themselves for the widespread views that Gramsci valorised civil society over and against the state as the necessary locus of working-class agitation in the West, that hegemony was mainly (or merely, depending upon one's point of view) 'cultural', and therefore that it represented a transition away from the more 'political' focus on the state of the classical-Marxist and, more particularly, Bolshevik tradition. Gramsci's first model, as presented by Anderson, implied that 'the power of capital essentially or exclusively takes the form of cultural hegemony in the West'.⁷¹ However,

once bourgeois power in the West is primarily attributed to cultural hegemony, the acquisition of this hegemony would mean effective assumption by

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ As we have seen, the initial passage cited in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' was not Q 7, §16, but rather, Q 13, §24. Furthermore, in its first appearance in Anderson's study, Gramsci's famous juxtaposition of the state as 'everything' in the East and only an 'outer ditch' in the West in Q 7, §16 had been assigned to the *second* model, in which 'the State encompasses civil society' (Anderson 1976a, p. 13), and not to the first.

⁷⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 26.

⁷¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 41.

the working class of the 'direction of society' without the seizure and transformation of State power, in a painless transition to socialism: in other words, a typical idea of Fabianism.⁷²

Anderson entered all the qualifications necessary to distance himself from the most vulgar and unproblematic ascription of these positions to Gramsci that were then in fashion. Nevertheless, only one conclusion was possible on the basis of the evidence that he had amassed. Gramsci had indeed been an honourable man, as Althusser had declaimed: 'Gramsci himself, of course, never drew this conclusion [of pursuing a reformist strategy in the West]', Anderson added. Nevertheless, 'in the scattered letter of his texts, it was not an entirely arbitrary interpolation either'.⁷³

How could this have happened? How could the thought of one of the most combative revolutionary leaders of the proletarian upsurge of the early 1920s have issued in such 'a classically reformist syllogism' by the time of his imprisonment in the early 1930s?⁷⁴ Anderson's answer lay in a combination of the non-public status of the *Prison Notebooks* and the particularly adverse conditions of their composition. The theses encapsulated in the slogan the dictatorship of the proletariat, as promulgated in the early years of the Comintern, constituted the unstated assumption of Gramsci's thought in prison, Anderson argued. However,

⁷² Anderson 1976a, p. 46.

⁷³ Ibid. Such suggestions of guilt by (unintended) association were a constant refrain of Anderson's analysis. In an earlier formulation, he had referred to 'the *involuntary* temptation that lurks in some of Gramsci's notes' (Anderson 1976a, p. 41); soon after, he suggested that Gramsci 'allowed' the conclusion that bourgeois class power was primarily consensual' (Anderson 1976a, p. 45) and that 'the result was to *permit* later codifications of his thought' (Anderson 1976a, p. 46); he concluded that 'the conditions of Gramsci's composition in prison produced a non-unitary, fragmentary theory, which *inherently allowed* discrepancies and incoherences in it' (Anderson 1976a, p. 72; italics mine). The notion that Gramsci, in texts he wrote with no intention of publication, had opened the way towards Eurocommunism was an unstated assumption motivating this critique. Rather than conceding 'philological' terrain to Eurocommunist distortions, however, Anderson's critique would have been immeasurably strengthened, in my view, by insisting more upon the fundamental incompatibility of Gramsci's concept of politics with that implicit in Eurocommunist 'parliamentary adventurism'. While the latter continued Stalinism's endorsement of a classically bourgeois concept of politics as management, Gramsci attempted to return Marxist theory to its original insight into the possibility of a politics 'of another type': namely, a politics founded in class struggle.

⁷⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 46.

he seems to have taken them so much for granted that they scarcely ever figure directly in his discourse at all. They form as it were the familiar acquisition, which no longer needed reiteration, in an intellectual enterprise whose energies were concentrated elsewhere—on the discovery of the unfamiliar.⁷⁵

The complementarity of the notions of hegemony and the dictatorship of the proletariat was thus the truth that did not need to speak its name in notes written for personal rather than public use. It was also the truth that perhaps did not dare to speak its name, for these notes were also subject to the censorship and self-censorship to which Gramsci had been compelled to resort in order to evade the prison authorities. Thus denied under prison conditions ‘any possibility of integrated composition’ of both his esoteric and exoteric doctrines, fated never to see the hoped-for day that would permit their more rigorous formulation, ‘the persistent risk of temporarily losing sight of older verities’ to which Gramsci was exposed had been realised in the Eurocommunist appropriation and the subsequent effacement of civil hegemony’s necessary complement, the thesis of the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat in the sphere of the state.⁷⁶ It thus seemed legitimate to claim that Gramsci had been, however unwittingly, open to appropriation as the ‘theoretical force’—in the particular sense these appellations had in the 1970s—behind this transition.

Despite the prison censorship régime, however, Gramsci did dare, on at least one occasion, to stress the complementarity of the notions of hegemony and the dictatorship of the proletariat, albeit with a slight variation of terms (whose meaning, however, is perfectly clear):

the greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of praxis, on the terrain of political struggle and organisation and with a political terminology, has reassessed—in opposition to the various ‘economistic’ tendencies—the front of cultural struggle and constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force.⁷⁷

This clear reference, however, seems to have evaded the Eurocommunists’ and many others’ interpretative paradigms. The conception of hegemony as a

⁷⁵ Anderson 1976a, pp. 46–7.

⁷⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 47.

⁷⁷ *Q* 101, § 12; *SPN*, p. 56.

‘complement’—not ‘realisation’, but ‘complement’—will be further explored in Chapter Six; it is decisive for any accurate interpretation of Gramsci’s concept that dispenses with the tragically romantic but fanciful notion that Gramsci had forgotten that which he already knew all too well.

A similar subtle shift is discernible in Anderson’s re-presentation of Gramsci’s second model. In its first appearance, Anderson had characterised this as an inversion of the first model. Rather than civil society encircling the state, here the state had been characterised as ‘merely an external and dispensable surface’ and civil society as ‘a central core or inner redoubt’.⁷⁸ The central text proposed to illustrate this model had been Q 7, § 16. Now, it was the second model (rather than, as previously, the first model) in which ‘civil society is presented as in balance or equilibrium with the State, and hegemony is distributed between State—or “political society”—and civil society’.⁷⁹ Furthermore, hegemony itself in this model was ‘redefined to *combine* coercion and consent’.⁸⁰ In other words, hegemony’s expansion across the borders of civil society into the state was accompanied by an expansion of the concept itself: hegemony now spoke not only the *lingua franca* of civil society (cultural consent), but also the tongue of the state (political coercion). Apart from some short passages (including one referring to ‘the apparatus of political and cultural hegemony of the ruling class’),⁸¹ no text was offered to substantiate philologically the presence of this model in the *Prison Notebooks*.

Whereas Gramsci’s first model had excluded the state from a consideration of the foundations of bourgeois power (that is, hegemony) in the West, this second model seemed initially to offer a salutary corrective to such one-sidedness, without repeating the error in the opposite direction, in a mirror image of the first model, by proposing the simple preponderance of the state. Bourgeois hegemony was now seen as being ‘co-present in civil society and the State alike’.⁸² However, the accompanying redefinition of hegemony itself

⁷⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 10.

⁷⁹ Anderson 1976a, p. 31.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Q 8, § 179.

⁸² Anderson 1976a, p. 32. The supporting passage, previously alluded to but not integrated into Anderson’s proposed three models, was the following: ‘The normal exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of a parliamentary régime is characterized by a combination of force and consent which form variable equilibria, without force ever prevailing too much over consent’ (Q 13, § 37; *SPN*, p. 80).

as 'consent + coercion' produced an untenable definition of another type. It neglected the fact that coercion, unlike consent, was structurally confined by the very nature of the advanced bourgeois state to only one terrain. 'There is always a *structural asymmetry* in the distribution of the consensual and coercive functions of this power. Ideology is shared between civil society and the State: violence pertains to the State alone'.⁸³ The proposition of a simultaneously consensual and coercive hegemony thus once again underestimated the specific efficacy of the state.

Several reasons for this conflation were essayed,⁸⁴ before settling on 'the recurrent tendency of [Gramsci's] theory towards an over-extension of its concepts' (extensions of the concept of the police and legality were the cited examples).⁸⁵ Seemingly, Gramsci had been aware of the inadequacy of his first model's neglect of the importance of the state for securing and guaranteeing bourgeois consensual power in civil society, and had attempted to integrate new elements in order to correct it; but the absence in prison of the checks and balances of empirical studies to confirm and specify his theoretical insights consigned them to an unwarranted overextension and speculative, rather than scientific, elaboration.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Chief among these was 'the exceptional emergence of military gangs [*gli squadristi*] organized by the fascists [in 1920–2], which operated freely outside the State apparatus proper. The structural monopoly of violence by the capitalist State was thus to some extent masked by conjunctural commando operations (Gramsci's term) within civil society' (Anderson 1976a, p. 32). Although Anderson acknowledged that Gramsci was 'well aware' that such coercive actions could only occur with the tacit consent of the state, he nevertheless maintained that it was 'possible' that they had led Gramsci into temporary confusions regarding the state's structural monopoly of violence.

⁸⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 33.

⁸⁶ Ironically, similar charges have been levelled at Anderson's essay itself. As Gregory Elliott wryly noted, 'Although Anderson stresses the predominantly philological character of ["The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci"], he does permit himself substantive conclusions, whose abstraction is striking. [...] "Antinomies" deliberately proceeds at a generic level, abstaining from the "accurate reconnaissance of [any] individual country" enjoined by Gramsci in the midst of the notes on "State and civil society" that supply much of Anderson's matter, and invoking "the masses" as the undifferentiated agency of its unsubstantiated strategy.' (Elliott 1998, p. 117.)

2.9. Political society + civil society = state

Gramsci's third version then extended to a redefinition of the state itself. As it turned out, bourgeois hegemony in the second model had been able to speak in the tongues of both coercion and consent because these were in fact not the distinct languages of two independent territories (the state and civil society, respectively), but dialects within one larger unitary sovereign apparatus.

In this version, the State now includes 'political society' and 'civil society' alike. In effect, there is a radicalization of the categorical fusion incipient in the second version. There is now no longer merely a distribution of hegemony, as a synthesis of coercion and consent, across State and civil society. State and civil society themselves are merged into a larger suzerain unity.⁸⁷

The most important texts cited to support this characterisation were the following:

By the State should be understood not merely the governmental apparatus, but also the 'private' apparatus of hegemony or civil society.⁸⁸

In reality civil society and State are one and the same.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Q 6, §137; SPN, p. 261.

⁸⁹ Q 13, §18; SPN, p. 160. Guido Liguori has maintained that it 'it would not be correct to derive from this or other passages a total identity—in Gramsci's thought—between economic society and political society, as between civil society and political society: Gramsci's language here has given in to a polemical forcing, which, however, if taken literally, is incompatible with the "rhythm of thought" of the author' (Liguori 2004b, pp. 211–12). The polemical context is indeed important. Anderson's central argument against this model was that it conflated two concepts whose distinction was necessary for an accurate analysis of the modern bourgeois parliamentary state and, in particular, its difference from the Fascist state. The passage from which this *bon mot* was cruelly ripped, however, makes precisely such a conceptual distinction, while at the same time insisting that, in reality, there is a tendency towards practical identification between the two spheres due to the interventionist actions of members of the state apparatus. The note is entitled 'Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of "Economism"' (written in 1932–3); it reformulates an earlier note (Q 4, §38; written in October 1930), with some significant conceptual precisions. 'The ideas of the Free Trade movement are based on a theoretical error whose practical origin is not hard to identify; they are based on a distinction between political society and civil society, which, from being a methodological distinction, is made into and presented as an organic one. Thus it is asserted that economic activity belongs to civil society, and that

In short, the essential distinction between the state and civil society, so important, according to Anderson, for Marxist attempts 'to define the specificity of bourgeois democracy in the West',⁹⁰ was annulled. 'The State becomes coextensive with the social formation, as in international usage. The concept of civil society as a distinct entity disappears'.⁹¹

If this were indeed the case, it would logically follow that the term 'civil society' should disappear from Gramsci's discourse after its identification with the state. However, as Francioni pointed out, after the emergence of Gramsci's new notion of the integral state in the autumn of 1930, the term 'civil society' in fact appears... thirty-two times. Francioni argues that

the most interesting thing to note is that the enlargement of the concept of the state is not followed by the 'disappearance' of political society and civil society to the benefit of the new 'integral' notion: having maintained that the distinction is methodological, Gramsci can still make a very frequent use of these two concepts whenever the analysis necessitates it.⁹²

Gramsci posited the dialectical unity of political and civil society, and not their identity or fusion. In fact, it was precisely against the notion of an 'ontological' identity of the two terrains of the modern social formation that Gramsci polemicalised, particularly in Gentile's formulation.

the State must not intervene to regulate it. But since in effective reality civil society and the State identify with each other [*società civile e Stato si identificano*], it must be made clear that *laissez-faire* too is a form of State "regulation", introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends, and not the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts' (Q 13, § 18; SPN, pp. 159–160). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, from which Anderson's citation seems to have been taken, translates the decisive phrase '*società civile e Stato si identificano*' as 'civil society and State are one and the same'. This translates more or less accurately the words of the corresponding A text (Q 4, § 38): '*società politica e società civile sono una stessa cosa*'. However, it does not allow an English reader to note the stronger, more active emphasis Gramsci has introduced in his revised C text with the reflexive verb. In short, this passage, read in context, stresses, in a classical-Marxist fashion, the necessity of state intervention in the economic sphere. Gramsci's argument that the distinction between the state and civil society is, properly understood, methodological rather than organic, is crucial for grasping the dialectical dimensions of his new concept of the state.

⁹⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 34.

⁹¹ Anderson 1976a, pp. 32–3.

⁹² Francioni 1984, p. 197. Chapter Five of this study, Section 5.2.6. in particular, will offer a slightly different explanation of Gramsci's use of these terms.

Croce seeks to maintain a distinction between civil society and political society, between hegemony and dictatorship [...] Gentile posits the (economic-) corporative phase as the ethical phase in the historical act: hegemony and dictatorship are indistinguishable, force is immediately consent: political society and civil society cannot be distinguished.⁹³

Rather than considering that Gramsci might have introduced a profoundly radical renewal of the concepts of state and civil society against their liberal deformation (we will examine this in Chapters Four and Five more closely), Anderson instead conducted his critique by way of a comparison to (arguably, substitution of) Althusser's proposal of a seemingly similarly comprehensive conception of the state in his notion of 'Ideological State Apparatuses'. He regarded such a totalising vision as inadequate for an analysis of the advanced capitalist state in the West. On the one hand, its expansionary logic—subsuming all social practices and institutions within the state—was deemed inadequate for distinguishing between the 'normal' bourgeois parliamentary régime and forms such as the Fascist state, characterised precisely by such an encroachment of the state onto terrains traditionally located outside of it in civil society. The latter, in actual fact, tended to realise practically the subsumption of civil society within the state apparatus that Gramsci's third model, according to Anderson, had only theoretically essayed. 'The unscientific character of such theses is obvious; the European working class paid heavily for anticipations of them in the twenties and early thirties',⁹⁴ Anderson declared. 'The *boundaries* of the State are not a matter of indifference to Marxist theory or revolutionary practice'.⁹⁵ Their correct delineation permitted an accurate estimation of the coercive arsenal at the bourgeoisie's disposal, while, at the same time, making clear the intricate networks of consensual power located outside of the state, *sensu stricto*. In the absence of such a crucial distinction, the state threatened to become a bland *alles, was der Fall ist* at any particular moment. *Der Staat wird zum Zustand*.

On the other hand, despite appearing to assign not merely preponderance but absolute dominance to the state, Anderson argued that *civitas sive societas civilis* in actual fact threatened to eliminate the state as a meaningful term of

⁹³ Q 6, §10; *SPN*, p. 271.

⁹⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 36.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

political analysis. For, once the state was everything, there was no need to determine its specific efficacy (seen since at least Weber as the monopoly of coercive power, in the last instance, in a social formation) or to distinguish it from that which it was not. If the state included *all* social practices, *any* social practice, in its capacity as a component part of the state, could be regarded as a legitimate target for proletarian agitation against the state as such (and not merely one of its consensual supports in civil society, because this was now redefined as a terrain *within* the state). Although appearing to posit the state as a monolithic unity, such a conception of the state in reality presented it as *divisible*, according to an expressivist paradigm: as the 'state-essence' was equally present in all of its individual manifestations, blows against its manifold Hydra-heads could be arithmetically calculated in a simple fashion until the beast was finally vanquished by force of numbers. 'Reformist consequences', according to Anderson, lay in wait for this seemingly ultra-leftist extension of the concept of the state. It could lead to

the idea that trade-union locals or cinema studios were part of the State apparatus in the West (in which case the victory of a communist slate or the making of a militant film would putatively count as gradual conquests of 'parts' of a divisible State apparatus—in defiance of the fundamental Marxist tenet of the political unity of the bourgeois State which precisely necessitates a revolution to end it).⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 37. The logic of this argument seems to have been the following: in a first move, Anderson asserted that 'the concept of civil society as a distinct entity disappears' (Anderson 1976a, pp. 33–4) in Gramsci's third model of the relationship between the terms state and civil society. This 'last version of the dyad State and civil society [...] abandons the distinction between the two [State and civil society] altogether, to proclaim their identity' (Anderson 1976a, p. 35). Then, he focused upon Althusser's famous claim that 'the concept of "*civil society*" disappears from Marx's work' (Althusser 1969, pp. 109–10; cf. Anderson 1976a, p. 34). In a third moment, Althusser replaced Gramsci: 'Once he had rejected the notion of civil society, Althusser was thus later logically led to a drastic assimilation of Gramsci's final formula, which effectively abolishes the distinction between State and civil society' (Anderson 1976a, p. 35). Finally, the extended syllogism turned towards the rising sun: 'The political reasons for this sudden and arbitrary theoretical decision [abolition of distinction between public and private, proposition of State as Leviathan] are not entirely clear. However, it seems probable that they were in large measure a product of the attraction exercised by the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the late sixties, on semi-oppositional sectors of the European Communist Parties' (Anderson 1976a, pp. 35–6). Thus, by implication, Gramsci's model of the integral state could be associated with the worst ultra-leftist excesses of *maoisant* Western-European Communists in the 1970s—while simultaneously, of course, remaining compromised by the reformism of his first two formulations.

2.10. Shadows of Croce

Why did Gramsci, inmate of a Fascist prison cell, propose a theoretical model that made the reasons and conditions of his own incarceration more difficult to grasp?⁹⁷ Anderson chose to decline the problem in terms of the history of philosophy, as a residual ‘non-Marxist’ dimension that compromised Gramsci’s thought. ‘Gramsci did not produce the idea of an indefinite extension of the State as a political structure from nowhere’, Anderson argued. ‘He took it, quite directly, from Benedetto Croce’.⁹⁸ Without exploring in detail the context of Croce’s conception of the state or Gramsci’s critical commentaries on it, Anderson condemned its ‘metaphysical character’ and suggested that such a ‘numinous essence of the State’ similarly informed Gramsci’s final equation.⁹⁹

This speculative and anti-scientific legacy of Croce’s thought undoubtedly had its effects on Gramsci’s work. . . . The misguided direction in which the Crocean fancy led is evident in all those passages of Gramsci’s writings which assert or suggest a dissolution of the boundaries between State and civil society.¹⁰⁰

Gramsci’s ‘Croceanism’ (particularly his supposedly ‘Crocean historicism’) had been a dominant theme in the prior reception of the *Prison Notebooks*. In a period alert to the residual efficacy of ‘non-Marxist’ problematics even in the most Marxist of thinkers, Anderson’s proposal seemed to offer a rational explanation for the speculative over-extension of Gramsci’s conception of the state.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Anderson did note, however, that there was a discrepancy between Gramsci’s theoretical reflections and his empirically focused analyses. Whatever risks were contained in his theoretical models, he never failed to register the clear distinction between ‘normal’ parliamentary régimes and the Fascist state when concrete cases were his point of reference (Anderson 1976a, p. 40).

⁹⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 40.

¹⁰¹ Anderson sometimes seemed to press his case to an extreme, perhaps resulting in a certain rhetorical overextension. ‘Gramsci did not produce the idea of an indefinite extension of the State as a political structure from nowhere. *He took it, quite directly, from Benedetto Croce. No less than four times in the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci cited Croce’s view that the “State” was a higher entity, not to be identified with mere empirical government, that could at times find its real expression in what might seem institutions

However, while Croce was at one moment credited with a 'totalitarian' version of the state, a few pages later Anderson suggested that Gramsci's residual Croceanism had been responsible for the overvalorisation of civil society in his supposed first model, rather than for the statist excesses of the third model.¹⁰² At the same time, he quoted decisive passages from Gramsci's critique of Gentile¹⁰³—though without noting that a 'numinous essence of the State' that posited its absorption of civil society was a 'fancy' of Gentilean rather than Crocean inspiration. The effacement of a distinction between civil society and the state properly belongs to the problematic of Gentile, theoretician of the Fascist accomplishment of the extension of the state in practice. 'Everything within the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State', as was once (and sometimes, scandalously, still is) inscribed on Italian public buildings.¹⁰⁴ Croce, on the other hand, as Gramsci emphasises on numerous occasions, valorised the ethical-political in history, that is, those elements that lie outside the state; his suggestions that the true 'State' may lie outside the governmental machinery (discussed by Gramsci, and seized upon by Anderson as proof for the Crocean inspiration of Gramsci's final model)¹⁰⁵ in fact involves a redefinition of terms, so that Croce's 'metaphysical conception of the State' refers to the primacy of civil society.

2.11. East and West, past and present

The ultimate foundation of Gramsci's mistakes, however, in all of his successive models, was the assumption that the 'states' in East and West were indeed qualitatively of the same type, and could therefore be productively compared in their variation.

or arenas of civil society. [...] *The metaphysical character of Croce's conception is, of course, manifest: the idea of a numinous essence of the State, floating majestically above mere juridical or institutional appearances, was a typically Hegelian heritage.*' (Anderson 1976a, pp. 39–40; italics mine.)

¹⁰² Anderson 1976a, p. 47–8.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Q 8, § 190; SPN, p. 261.

¹⁰⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 39.

In other words, the terms East and West assume that the social formations on each side of the divide exist in the *same temporality*, and can therefore be read off against each other as variations of a common category. It is this unspoken presupposition which lies behind the central texts of Gramsci's notebooks.¹⁰⁶

The contemporaneity, even in their variation and significant disjunction, of all states in a world system characterised as 'imperialist' had been, of course, Lenin's fundamental argument to justify the possibility and necessity of revolution in Russia—not merely a bourgeois revolution, but a socialist revolution in one national formation, within a wave of socialist revolutionary movements traversing both imperialist metropolis and its periphery. Lenin, it is true, as Anderson emphasised, had stressed that the administrative apparatus of Tsarism had been a 'feudal State machine'¹⁰⁷—before early 1917. Yet there is an important difference between such a normative description of governmental structures and a theoretical characterisation of the state as such. The description of the state administrative apparatus of Tsarism as a feudal machine does not preclude a characterisation of the state, taken in its totality, as thoroughly capitalist (unless, of course, one wishes surreptitiously to define the state as identical with its administrative apparatus—an instrumentalist definition that has little in common with the political and class-focused definition of the Marxist tradition). For Lenin, by the time of the October Revolution, the Russian state, including its administrative apparatus, had become a capitalist state in the fullest sense.¹⁰⁸ It was on this basis that he could describe the interregnum of 1917 as a situation of 'dual power', and call for the soviets to demolish their capitalist antagonist's *state* (and not merely its administrative apparatus).¹⁰⁹

For Anderson, on the other hand, student of the development of state-forms, there was a 'differential historical time' at work that distinguished the 'specifically "Eastern" variant of a *feudal State*'¹¹⁰ from 'the specificity and stability of the repressive machinery of army and police, and its functional relationship to

¹⁰⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Anderson 1976a, p. 51.

¹⁰⁸ 'State power in Russia has passed into the hands of a new class, namely, the bourgeoisie and landowners who had become bourgeois. To this extent, the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Russia is completed' (Lenin 1964, Volume 24, p. 57).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Lenin 1964, Volume 23, pp. 295–342; Lenin 1964, Volume 24, pp. 38–41; pp. 57–91; pp. 445–8. For a recent discussion of some of the themes of 'dual power', cf. Žižek 2002.

¹¹⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 50.

the representative machinery of suffrage and parliament, within the Western State'.¹¹¹ Gramsci's failure to register accurately the non-contemporaneity of East and West—and therefore to comprehend that a comparative analysis that assumed their distinction within a fundamental unity could not yield the analytical terms to characterise either, least of all the specific structures of the more 'advanced' Western state-form, belonging to its 'own' time—had allowed him to begin from effectively ahistorical juxtapositions: East and West, state and civil society, war of manoeuvre and war of position. The result was an underestimation of the importance of the state for guaranteeing bourgeois power in the Western social formations, in Gramsci's first model, or its effective effacement through unwarranted identification with the social formation *tout court*, in his third. Thus misguided, proletarian strategy in the West could not but remain, in a strict sense, quixotic, tilting at the imaginary absence of oriental windmills.

2.12. Antinomies of the united front

Nevertheless, as if kicking against his own theoretical insights, Gramsci's political instincts had detected the necessary starting point for the elaboration of a political strategy adequate to the distinctive conditions obtaining in the West—in the 1970s just as much as the 1930s. The final movement in Anderson's symphonic performance was thus dedicated to deciphering the enigmatic equation

¹¹¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 52. This hypothesis was central to Anderson's broader research project in the period. Against Lenin, Anderson had argued that '*the Russian revolution was not made against a capitalist state at all*'. The Tsarism which fell in 1917 was a feudal apparatus: the Provisional government never had time to replace it with a new or stable bourgeois apparatus. The Bolsheviks made a *socialist revolution* but from beginning to end they never confronted the *central enemy* of the workers' movement in the West' (Anderson 1974b, p. 359). Anderson here came very close to endorsing a Menshevik analysis of the unripeness of Russia for revolution and the concomitant preliminary need for a bourgeois revolution and period of 'proper' capitalism prior to socialist transformation. As a number of critics have noted, there was a problematic formulation in Anderson's analyses of the terms of feudalism (as putative mode of production), absolutism (as political state-form) and capitalism (as distinct mode of production and state-form). For a discussion of some of the problems with Anderson's characterisation of absolutism and its relationship to feudalism, cf. Elliott 1998, pp. 83–5; Blackledge 2004, pp. 71–4. On Anderson's belated 'Bordigism', cf. Section 6.1.4.

in which Gramsci had articulated all of the dimensions of his researches: 'Civil Hegemony = War of Position = United Front'. In late 1930, Gramsci had argued that

it seems to me that Ilich understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only possible form in the West. . . . This is what the formula of the 'United Front' seems to me to mean.¹¹²

Originally a Comintern perspective from the early 1920s (developed in part as a reaction against ultra-leftisms in the West, particularly the notoriously adventurist *Teilaktionen* of the KPD, but rooted in a much deeper strategic analysis), Gramsci redeployed the concept of the united front in the changed political conjuncture of the early 1930s.¹¹³ Anderson argued that

the United Front [...] acquired a new relevance for Gramsci in the dire conjuncture of the early thirties. Indeed, it can be said that it was the madness of the Third Period that finally helped him to understand it.¹¹⁴

Against Third-Period doctrines of social-fascism and fantasies of imminent proletarian revolution from within the Fascist order, Gramsci argued for a re-actualisation of the earlier strategy of the united front, characterised by Anderson as 'the necessity for deep and serious ideological-political work among the masses, untainted by sectarianism, before the seizure of power could be on the agenda'.¹¹⁵

At the same time, he significantly transformed the original perspective. For whereas, according to Anderson, the original Comintern motions had stressed the conjunctural validity of the politics of the united front (reflux of the revolutionary upsurge following WWI and need for a period of consolidation of working-class forces in order to launch another attack upon the state), Gramsci generalised the concept of the united front, as a theoretical canon, in a threefold movement:

¹¹² Q 7, §16; *SPN*, pp. 237–8.

¹¹³ Cf. Section 6.2.5. On the fate of the German Revolution, cf. Broué 2005.

¹¹⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 60.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. Cf. Section 5.1.2. for Gramsci's explicit rejection of a 'stageist' conception of the united front.

- a. first, he equated the united front with the war of position, counterposed to the (adventurist or other) strategy of war of manoeuvre;
- b. second, he equated war of position with the strategy most adequate to proletarian movements in the West, as distinct from their Eastern counterpart;
- c. and third, he went in search of the lineages of the Western state of the 1920s, finding that its distinctive features extended well back into the nineteenth century.

If war of position thus responded to enduring and essential structural characteristics in the West, its equivalent concept, the united front, could be extended to signify a valid strategy for proletarian hegemony in this zone for an entire historical period. The circle was complete.

Or was it? As Paggi emphasises, the notion that the united front might have an 'epochal' and not merely conjunctural validity was not Gramsci's invention, but a commonplace of early Third-International debates.¹¹⁶ Among its most strident proponents were none other than Lenin and Trotsky. Significantly, Lenin had proposed this position well before the failure of the German Revolution, in accordance with his thesis of the 'primacy of politics'.¹¹⁷ As we will see in subsequent chapters, Gramsci's threefold renovation of this position moved in a very different direction:

- a. first, in very changed conditions, he deployed this political 'pessimism of the intellect' or 'realism' of the early 1920s against the economic triumphalism of the Third Period;
- b. second, he specified the historical causes of such a stalemate, in order to understand how to exit from it;
- c. and third, with his 'anti-fatalist' elaboration of the concept of 'passive revolution', he integrated his political-historical analysis with, on the one hand, the fundamental terms of Marx's critique of political economy and, on the other, the *Theses on Feuerbach's* concept of praxis as 'revolutionary', 'practical-critical' activity.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Paggi 1984, pp. 3–11.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Section 6.1.4.

¹¹⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 3.

The result was the formulation of the ‘doctrine of hegemony ... as the actual form of the Forty-Eightist doctrine of the “permanent revolution”’.¹¹⁹

2.13. The spectre of Kautsky

Far from revolution of any type, however, Anderson saw something else lurking in Gramsci’s attempted extension of a conjunctural insight to characterise Western parliamentary régimes from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards: reformism, and not just any type of reformism, but precisely that reformism that had prepared the end of the international unity of the classical-Marxist period with the nationalist betrayals of 1914.¹²⁰ ‘[U]nknown to himself, Gramsci had an illustrious predecessor’, Anderson argued.

Karl Kautsky, in a famous debate with Rosa Luxemburg, had in 1910 argued that the German working class in its fight against capital should adopt an *Ermattungsstrategie*—a ‘strategy of attrition’. He had explicitly counterposed this conception to what he called a *Niederwerfungsstrategie*—a ‘strategy of overthrow’.¹²¹

Reconstructing the 1910 debate in *Die Neue Zeit* between Kautsky, Luxemburg and others and its echoes in Russian Social Democracy,¹²² Anderson argued that there were decisive similarities between the positions that had signalled the emergence of Kautsky’s renegacy and those that Gramsci developed in prison, and which were fiercely contested by his party comrades.¹²³ ‘Gramsci

¹¹⁹ *Q* 101, § 12; *SPN*, p. 56.

¹²⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 62.

¹²¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 61. Anderson reconstructed Kautsky’s unacknowledged appropriation of the term *Ermattungsstrategie* from Delbrück, who later, in World War I, equated it, seemingly revealingly, with *Stellungskrieg* [war of position] (Anderson 1976a, pp. 61–2). He failed to note, however, that the notion that revolutionary strategy would involve forms of guerrilla warfare (or ‘field civil war’, in Obolensky’s phrase) different from the classical formations of direct confrontation of (state) armies was not the monopoly of renegacy in the postwar period; it was also a common metaphor on the (far) Left in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, particularly in Germany. Lenin directly countered against the irresponsible deployment of such rhetoric without a realistic assessment of the balance of forces. Cf. Lenin 1964, Volume 27, p. 102 et sqq.

¹²² The debate is collected in Grunenberg (ed.) 1970. The Kautsky and Luxemburg contributions were translated into English in Crooke and Robinson (eds.) 1979.

¹²³ Cf. Rossi and Vacca 2007 for the most recent reconstruction, albeit contested, of Gramsci’s relations with the Party during his incarceration.

was himself', of course, 'proof against any sort of reformism',¹²⁴ Anderson acknowledged; he had indeed been an honourable man. But, theoretically, as solace against the madness of the Third Period, he had unconsciously rediscovered the fundamental organising perspective of 'Kautskyanism'. For once the united front had been equated with the war of position, against both the manoeuvrist strategies of adventurist *Teilaktionen* and Third Period all-out confrontation, it threatened to slide towards a gradualist reformism that was the mirror image of the ultra-leftist immediacy of the positions it proposed to replace.

Revolutionary strategy in Gramsci's account becomes a long, immobile trench-warfare between two camps in fixed positions, in which each tries to undermine the other culturally and politically.¹²⁵

In other words, it became permanent war of position, on a global scale, in a conjuncture that 'endured'. But this misunderstood the necessity, in particular conjunctures and in particular national contexts, for decisive manoeuvrist attacks upon the state, as the ultimate guarantee of bourgeois power in East and West alike. "The mere counterposition of "war of position" to "war of manoeuvre" in any Marxist strategy in the end becomes an opposition between reformism and adventurism'.¹²⁶ Gramsci's belated inheritance of the united front, and the historical and theoretical presupposition according to which he had chosen to inherit it, had thus ultimately not been enough to break the deadlock in the West. He had discerned, as if through a cloud, the necessary starting point, but his confusions and conflations had prevented him from elaborating it into a coherent theoretical perspective. 'In the labyrinth of the notebooks', Anderson argued in a penultimate moment, 'Gramsci lost his way'.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, Anderson could still argue in conclusion that

the central problematic of the United Front—the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death, the first concern of Gramsci in prison—retains all its validity today.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 72.

¹²⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 69.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Anderson 1976a, p. 72.

¹²⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 78.

Significantly—all the more so after criticising Gramsci at length for a tendency to abstraction—he did not explain how the longevity and resilience of this version of the united front might differ from the Gramsci's historical extension of war of position (= civil hegemony = united front) that he had just so soundly criticised.¹²⁹ As if in recompense for the severity of his critique, however, Anderson concluded on what was, at least by implication, a self-critical note. Gramsci's *aporiai* remained those of revolutionary Marxism in the 1970s. Only by setting out from Gramsci's antinomies, striving to turn them into contradictions capable of being resolved, would Marxists be able 'to be sufficiently contemporary with our past'.¹³⁰

2.14. A labyrinth within a labyrinth?

Francioni responded that it was Anderson, and not Gramsci, who had lost his way in a labyrinth of his own creation. Attempting to free Gramsci from his second (theoretical) incarceration, Anderson had himself become a 'prisoner of schematisms and ideological apriorisms'.¹³¹ He raised numerous doubts about the methodological procedure and philological accuracy of Anderson's study, declaring it to be 'a singular case of schematisation and impoverishment of Gramsci's thought'.¹³² Papi wondered whether Gramsci's 'ambiguities' were

¹²⁹ As Blackledge argued, 'The problem with this argument lies not in what is said but what is unsaid [...] His conclusion may have been to apply the United Front tactic but he never explains what this actually meant in practice' (Blackledge 2004, p. 85). From another angle, Gregory Elliott played devil's advocate to the optimism of this rhetorical flourish. 'Contrary to Anderson's fallacious conclusion—"The masses [...] have yet to be won over to revolutionary socialism [...] therefore, the central problematic of the United Front [...] retains all its validity today" [p. 78]—falsification of reformist socialism does not therewith furnish confirmation of revolutionary socialism. It may be that there is no third way: but why should the nonexecution of the United Front's task half a century or more later prove its current validity? The shackles of Stalinism in the intervening decades permit evasion of an equally legitimate, but much more disquieting, inference: that revolutionary socialism is no more viable in the West than its reformist rival' (Elliott 1998, p. 118). A quarter of a century later, Anderson's editorial to the second series of *NLR* (Anderson 2000) was thought by some to have moved closer to Elliott's pessimism (in stark contradiction to the hopes expressed in *Considerations on Western Marxism's* conclusion (1976), or the tempered but still sanguine *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983).

¹³⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 78.

¹³¹ Francioni 1984, p. 228.

¹³² Francioni 1984, p. 149.

indeed his own or had not instead been introduced by Anderson himself.¹³³ Other critics have similarly questioned the limitations of Anderson's main theses. In particular, Bucì-Glucksmann's *Gramsci and the State*, (published in French before Anderson's essay, in 1975) can be read as an almost point-by-point implicit refutation of Anderson's arguments regarding the general theoretico-political context of Gramsci's thought. Similarly, a series of other studies have questioned many of the assumptions that figured either implicitly or explicitly in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', though often without directly referring to it. To mention only the most prominent: Franco Lo Piparo, Peter Ives and Derek Boothman have stressed the linguistic roots of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, as a complement to its genealogy in Russian Social Democracy; Wolfgang Fritz Haug has problematised, among other elements, the (re-) translation of Gramsci's *società civile* with *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, as variously used by Hegel and Marx (and thus, by extension, also the assimilation of Gramsci's notion to the established Anglophone Marxist usage of 'civil society'); Domenico Losurdo and Fabio Frosini have studiously demolished any lingering doubts about the highly critical nature of Gramsci's relationship to Croce; Alberto Burgio has provided rich materials for rethinking the historiographical nature of Gramsci's concept of the 'integral State'.¹³⁴ These critiques, taken in their totality, call seriously into question some of the fundamental presuppositions of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci': on the one hand, they invite us to revisit the 'philological infrastructure' of Anderson's reading, in the light of new findings; on the other hand, they provide good reason to argue that, whatever the general validity of Anderson's political judgements, they are not applicable to, and their objects of condemnation cannot be found within, Gramsci's text itself.

However, such positions have remained largely un-noted beyond the field of Gramscian scholarship.¹³⁵ Among Anglophone Marxists more generally,

¹³³ 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' was published as a book in Italian as *Ambiguità di Gramsci* [*Ambiguities of Gramsci*], which, unfortunately, loses the important Kantian resonance of the original English title. Cf. Papi 1979.

¹³⁴ Cf. Lo Piparo 1979; Ives 2004a and 2004b; Boothman 2004; Haug 2006; Losurdo 1987 and 1997; Frosini 2003; Burgio 2002.

¹³⁵ Buttigieg 2006 represents an attempt to provide a succinct overview of the findings of recent Gramscian research for a non-specialist audience.

Anderson's study remains a touchstone thirty years later, an obligatory reference for all studies on the theme, despite the subsequent appearance of numerous book length studies and a burgeoning bibliography of specialist articles. The reasons for such prestige have already been noted: a combination of timely intervention, militancy, command of materials from several languages and the rare comprehensiveness of its scholarly apparatus. We can add to these Anderson's standing among Anglophone Marxists, both in his capacity as editor of the flagship *NLR* and as brilliant synthesiser and exponent of Marxist ideas, and the rhetorical persuasiveness (and sometimes seductiveness) of his prose: one of the reasons for the enduring appeal of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' for many on the far Left is the fact that it was not afraid confidently to offer a totalising image of Gramsci's political thought, even though it was dealing with famously contentious materials that often encourage scholarly hesitancy.

The philological apparatus of this chapter has attempted to suggest that we now possess a significant body of material that places in doubt some of Anderson's central judgements. It could indeed be objected that there is a touch of pedantry involved in enumerating these now, at a distance of thirty years—were it not for the philological standards invoked by Anderson himself at the beginning of and throughout his study, as the criteria by which any attempt to uncover the 'true' Gramsci should be judged. 'A systematic work of recovery is needed to discover' the real complexity of Gramsci's thought, Anderson argued, insisting that 'he is still largely an unknown author to us'.¹³⁶ While acknowledging the necessity of such a cautious approach, Francioni could nevertheless still object that Anderson had failed to maintain his own 'methodological premises',¹³⁷ leaving Gramsci as misrecognised as he had been before the critical edition. Indeed, such was the extent of Francioni's disagreement with both the methodological procedure and substantive findings of Anderson's study that he felt licensed, against the normal protocols of scholarly disputation, aggressively to invoke the words of Gramsci himself, as condemnatory motto for his critique:

¹³⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

¹³⁷ Francioni 1984, p. 152.

‘Importuning the text’—In other words, when out of zealous attachment to a thesis, one makes texts say more than they really do. This error of philological method occurs also outside of philology, in studies and analyses of all aspects of life. In terms of criminal law, it is analogous to selling goods at lesser weight and of different quality than had been agreed upon, but it is not considered a crime unless the will to deceive is glaringly obvious. But don’t negligence and incompetence deserve to be sanctioned—if not a judicial sanction, at least an intellectual and moral sanction?¹³⁸

Polemical excesses aside, Francioni would surely nevertheless still agree with Anderson’s insistence that it remains necessary to attempt ‘to analyse the precise forms and functions of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony’ and ‘to fix with greater precision what Gramsci said and meant in his captivity’.¹³⁹ For both philological and political reasons, this remains an urgent task today. Chapters Four, Five and Six of this study will attempt to reconstruct ‘the true theoretical context of [Gramsci’s] work’,¹⁴⁰ though in a slightly different sense from the notion that it might be possible to discover ‘what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of his thought’.¹⁴¹ Before doing so, however, it is necessary to confront the literary critical and formal presuppositions upon which Anderson’s analysis was built. As we will see, they have a representative status, as commonly held assumptions about Gramsci’s relationship with other thinkers, his methodology and the nature of the *Prison Notebooks* as a project. An analysis of their implicit and explicit perspectives can thus help to clarify some of the difficulties posed by the singular nature of the ‘rhythm’ of Gramsci’s thought. It is indeed true that ‘no Marxist work is so difficult to read accurately and systematically because of the peculiar conditions of its composition’; but ‘a sort of map’, if not an Ariadne’s thread, may allow us to orient ourselves ‘more easily in the Labyrinth of the *Prison Notebooks*’.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Q 6, §198. Francioni 1984, p. 148.

¹³⁹ Anderson 1976a, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

¹⁴² Francioni 1984, p. 21.

Chapter Three

‘A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery inside an Enigma’? On the Literary Form of the *Prison Notebooks*

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read [...]. If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see (*Ulysses*).

At the centre of the original Daedalus's labyrinth stood the Minotaur. The fairest children of a city whose name would later become synonymous with philosophy were forced to enter this intricate maze knowing full well that only one exit awaited them. Sooner or later, at one of the seemingly endless twists and turns of this prison, they would encounter this terrifying half-man and half-beast and be devoured by it. According to some legends, the architect of this labyrinth, the 'cunning worker' and creator of images, ended his days in Sardinia. From here later came forth a 'three- or four-fold provincial',¹ variously known as 'Gramsci, Granusci, Grámisci, Granísci, Gramásci, right up to Garamáscon, with all of the most bizarre intermediary forms',² fashioner in his own way of a chimera and artificer of his own labyrinth within his carceral home. For Gramsci, however, there was to be no winged escape

¹ Q 15, §19.

² Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 73.

from his confinement; unlike Daedalus, he was subject to a double imprisonment, both constructor and inmate of a labyrinth seemingly without exits.

Nobody would suggest that this softly spoken diminutive hunchback inspires the same terror as his predecessor's monstrosity. Nevertheless, many readers of the *Prison Notebooks* have registered a certain apprehension, a vague uncertainty of their bearings, a fear that they will become lost on their journey through this labyrinth and never reach its centre in order to confront its master, finally, face to face: to discover 'what Gramsci wrote in the true, obliterated text of his thought'.³ Anderson's preliminary cautions regarding the difficulties of reading the *Prison Notebooks* are in this sense representative of the most attentive and honest approaches to Gramsci's admittedly difficult and unusual work. Althusser, as we have seen, had also signalled his 'profound misgivings' and fears that his 'necessarily schematic remarks may disfigure the spirit of this enormously delicate and subtle work of genius'.⁴ Despite the severity of the charges he brought against Gramsci, he was determined, almost as if against his own prosecutorial interests, to ensure that justice was both done and seen to be done. 'First of all', he informed the imaginary jury, 'I should like to draw attention to one elementary precaution: I shall refuse to take Gramsci immediately at his word on every occasion and on any pretext or text'. Only when he had determined that a statement did not 'simply play the part of a language entrusted either with a polemical role or with a function of "practical" designation (designation either of an *existing* problem or object, or of a *direction* to take, in order best to pose and solve a problem)',⁵ would he proceed to pressing charges and urging rehabilitation. Although Althusser himself failed, for a variety of reasons both innocent and culpable, to determine Gramsci's 'most profound philosophical problematic', this aim should remain valid for any serious engagement with the *Prison Notebooks*.

Although his prefatory precautions and demands for philological accuracy seemed to indicate a commitment similar to Althusser's when he said that he would only 'consider [Gramsci's] *words* when I have confirmed that they have the function of "*organic*" concepts, concepts which really belong to his most profound philosophical problematic',⁶ Anderson's analysis, in fact, proceeded

³ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 126 cf., 131, 134.

⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 126.

⁶ Ibid.

according to a very different logic. His point of departure was four seemingly self-evident assumptions about the 'uniquely adverse process of composition' of the *Prison Notebooks*:

- a. first, he argued that Gramsci's use of inherited language to formulate his qualitatively new concepts had 'overlaid and deflected' their distinctive meaning;
- b. second, he supposed that Gramsci's attempt 'to evade his jailers' through the use of cryptic language reduced the theoretical clarity of his research;
- c. third, he suggested that there was a 'hidden order', a 'true' text of Gramsci's thought, and that this hidden order could be reconstructed;
- d. and, fourth, he warned that such a reconstruction needed to labour consciously against the deleterious effects of the fragmentary and hieroglyphic nature of the resulting text.

Anderson was not alone in making these assumptions. To a greater or lesser extent, in whole or in part, they had and still have a general currency, not only for many Marxists, but also for the wider non-Marxist audience. Nevertheless, as we shall see, these assumptions, while confirmed by a casual reading preceded by reputation, are in fact impediments to a genuine engagement with the *Prison Notebooks* as Gramsci wrote them. Due to their representative status, their detailed examination will allow us both to refute and problematise aspects of the received images of Gramsci, while also positing reading protocols more adequate for meeting the challenges of this distinctive and singular theoretical work.

3.1. Traces of the past

The first assumption is undeniable: Gramsci suffered 'the normal fate of original theorists', as Anderson himself phrased it, or, in the words of Althusser, 'the age [Gramsci] lived in did not provide him, and he could not acquire in his lifetime, an adequate concept with which to think what he produced'.⁷ All too

⁷ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 29.

often, Gramsci was forced to advance masked, appropriating concepts from other traditions (above all, from Croce and Machiavelli, but also from Sorel, Cuoco and others) and reforging them for his own ends. The risks of such a strategy, both for Gramsci and his later interpreters, are evident: unconscious continuation of (superficial or profound) themes from the 'original' problematic of the expropriated concept, on the one hand, confusion about its precise theoretical function in Gramsci's distinctive discourse, on the other. However, this 'normal' fact of philosophical and scientific practice, the necessary lag between the development of a concept and its adequate formulation, is not as disabling for an accurate assessment of Gramsci's researches as Anderson supposed. Gramsci almost always signals when he is appropriating a concept from another non-Marxist thinker, clearly indicating the limits—and problematising the terms—of his appropriation and drawing attention to the conceptual transformations he has wrought on it within the overall economy of his project. Arguably, Gramsci's fragmentary notes are clearer in this regard than the published texts of many other Marxist thinkers, including those of Marx himself: Gramsci does not content himself with merely 'coqueting' with modes of expression peculiar to Croce, but submits them to a thoroughgoing critique. In the process, he often transforms them into qualitatively *new* concepts. In part, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that the 'non-public' style of the *Prison Notebooks*—also present in Marx's extensive notebooks of excerpts and commentaries—allows a clearer demonstration of the conceptual 'value-adding process' than is possible in a text designed for a wider public consumption. For, while Gramsci was able to develop and clarify his concepts, a 'public' text, even the most exploratory and philologically accurate—two attributes rarely combined—must necessarily assume a large part of their conceptual apparatus, as the asserted foundation upon which argumentation can arise.

Dario Ragazzini has referred to one of the critical dimensions of Gramsci's appropriation of concepts as a 'philology of quotation marks'.⁸ He means by this Gramsci's procedure of setting concepts in quotations marks, in order to signal their appropriation from another thinker, or their conceptual problematisation in the course of his research. A striking example of this can be found,

⁸ Ragazzini 2002, p. 17.

as we will see in Chapter Five, in Gramsci's appropriation of the originally Crocean concept of 'absolute historicism'. In a first moment, in what appears to be a reference to Croce's system itself, it is written without the addition of punctuation;⁹ but, by the time of its second appearance, this time in relation to historical materialism, the problematical, perhaps even almost ironical, nature of such an attribution is duly noted by its enclosure in quotation marks. The same attention to the risks of confusion, either semantic or conceptual, is present on most occasions when Gramsci deploys concepts deriving from outside the Marxist tradition: the lineages of concepts such as 'historical bloc', 'passive revolution' and the 'ethico-political' are carefully noted, compared to perspectives from the Marxist tradition and only then integrated as constitutive moments in his analysis.

3.1.1. 'An arbitrary and mechanical hypostatisation of the moment of hegemony'

Gramsci's famous appropriation of the Crocean concept of the 'ethico-political', for instance, first appears when he is discussing the difference between Gentile's and Croce's theories of the state in late 1930.¹⁰ Unlike Gentile's 'actualist' obliteration of the distinction between civil society and the state to the benefit of the latter, Croce's concept maintained a distinction in unity between the two forms, locating the 'ethical' in civil society just as the 'political' is assigned to the state.¹¹ When it comes time to consider this concept in terms of historical materialism, Gramsci does not argue that it represents a 'philosophical exordium or equivalent to the doctrine of hegemony within historical materialism'; nor does he argue that Croce and Lenin can be regarded as 'joint authors of the notion of hegemony'.¹² Rather, he explicitly criticises the speculative dimension of Croce's attempt to grasp, 'as if through a cloud', the concrete historicity that is much more adequately comprehended by the philosophy of praxis's notion of hegemony.

⁹ It occurs in the sixth item of a list of 'preliminary elements' that should be kept in mind for the compilation of an introduction to the study of philosophy: 'transcendence, immanence, absolute historicism. Meaning and importance of the history of philosophy' (Q 8, §204).

¹⁰ Q 6, §10.

¹¹ Cf. Q 7, §9.

¹² Anderson 1976a, p. 48.

Real meaning of the formula 'ethico-political history'. It is an arbitrary and mechanical hypostatisation of the moment of 'hegemony'. The philosophy of praxis does not exclude ethico-political history. The opposition between Crocean historical doctrines and the philosophy of praxis lies in the speculative nature of Croce's conception. Conception of the State in Croce.¹³

Further, while discussing the possibility of a rational 'translation' of Crocean terminology, Gramsci argues that 'it is only a question of translating speculative language into historicist language, i.e. of seeing whether this speculative language has a concrete instrumental value, superior to previous instrumental values'.¹⁴ Finally, Gramsci draws conclusions that he repeats with greater certainty on a number of subsequent occasions.

One can say that not only does the philosophy of praxis not exclude ethico-political history, but that, indeed, in its most recent stage of development it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and in attaching 'full weight' to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones. [...] The philosophy of praxis thus judges the reduction of history to ethico-political history alone as improper and arbitrary, but does not exclude the latter.¹⁵

The reader of the *Prison Notebooks* is here given explicit instructions on how to understand Gramsci's particular usage of the concept of the 'ethico-political'. The Crocean dual concept is used in order to highlight the internal bifurcation of the unitary Marxist concept of hegemony, but Gramsci simultaneously clearly states the limits of such a comparative perspective: Croce's 'ethico-political' history is judged to be a speculative deformation of the more concrete

¹³ Q 101, 7°, written in April–May 1932; *FSPN*, pp. 329–30; cf. also Q 101, 12°.

¹⁴ Q 101, §7; *FSPN*, p. 344. 'Instrumental value' is itself an ironical appropriation, 'expropriating the expropriator', so to speak. As we will see in Chapters Seven and Eight, the concept was central to Croce's patronising reduction of historical materialism to a mere 'canon of research' in his own speculative historiography. Gramsci returns the compliment with interest: 'For the philosophy of praxis, the conception of ethico-political history, in as much as it is independent of any realistic conception, can be assumed as an "empirical canon" of historical research, to be kept continually in mind while studying and analysing historical development, if it is desired to arrive at an integral history and not one that is partial and extrinsic (history of economic forces as such, etc.).' (Q 101, § 12; *FSPN*, pp. 357–8.)

¹⁵ Q 101, §7; *FSPN*, pp. 345–6; cf. Q 101, § 12.

and realist Marxist concept. Gramsci's subsequent usage of the Crocean formulation can therefore be understood as a form of short-hand to refer to precisely this dual dimension of an 'integral' concept of hegemony, not an unproblematical equation of the two, and certainly not an abandonment of the specificity of the latter. The non-Marxist concept is subordinated to—or, in the sense of conceptual value-adding, 'exploited' by—a conceptual structure derived from the Marxist tradition, and its deployment is one of an instructive *analogy* that never forgets its methodological or analytical—rather than 'ontological'—status.

3.1.2. A strategy of detours

Gramsci was well equipped to negotiate the risks of such a 'strategy of detours' due to two central elements of his general theoretical perspective: on the one hand, his analysis, in a perspective of comparative historical linguistics, of the metaphorical dimension inherent in all uses of language, 'the conceptual' in a strong form; and, on the other, the theory of 'translatability' between different thought paradigms, supplemented by his attempt to locate the 'historically rational kernel' of speculative thought-forms. As we will see in more detail in Chapter Eight (regarding the 'merely' 'metaphorical' status of the term 'immanence' in the philosophy of praxis), Gramsci was fully aware that the present, child of the past, must perforce learn to speak by means of imitation of that which has already been said. He was also aware, however, that such imitation involves not merely passive acceptance of the past, but its active transformation by the new needs of the present, the inheritance of a tradition in the true sense of the word.

For Gramsci was not only compelled to work towards 'radically new concepts in an old vocabulary, designed for other purposes and times, which overlaid and deflected their meaning';¹⁶ he also *chose* to employ an 'old vocabulary' in order to formulate his own concepts, by affiliating to the Marxist tradition. In a certain sense, he advanced masked within Marxist theory itself. Anderson, like many other readers of the *Prison Notebooks*, seems to have assumed that the 'known' meanings of such concepts within the prior Marxist tradition could be

¹⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

safely ascribed to Gramsci's usage, and departures from them accounted for as exceptions, or the undesired intrusion of the 'non-Marxist' dimensions of Gramsci's research project into its Marxist 'hard core'. Such assumptions, however, are clearly problematic. First, they implicitly assert precisely that which needs to be proven (if indeed it could be), namely, the existence of a uniform and relatively stable conceptual 'Marxist' vocabulary, from which Gramsci is then presumed to have 'departed'. In truth, the texts of Marx and Engels, to say nothing of those of later Marxist theorists, give no evidence of such a univocal register. Rather, as a tradition, Marxism has been defined by an incessant struggle over the precise meanings of the components of its own conceptual arsenal, as befits an expansive, rather than degenerating, research programme.¹⁷ Gramsci's departures from a supposed Marxist 'orthodoxy' regarding such central categories as hegemony, the state and civil society, therefore, are much more fruitfully and accurately seen as a contribution to this ongoing debate and elaboration of the tradition.

Second, and more significantly for our present purposes, these assumptions presume that, when familiar Marxist terms appear on the pages of the *Prison Notebooks*, it can be taken for granted *prima facie* that they are 'supposed' to refer to the meanings they had in other Marxist theorists; when these expectations are later disappointed, a 'subtle shift' in Gramsci's use of the term can be declared. As any attentive reading of the diachronic development of the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates, however, this was not Gramsci's procedure. He did not begin by asserting a given conceptual structure that he then deformed or modified. Rather, he began by making an inventory of given and received elements in the Marxist tradition (which, of course, constituted also his own immediate practical and theoretical past). Only later did he mould these received elements into new theoretical positions, whose conceptual necessity emerged in the course of his analysis. Just as he appropriated concepts from non-Marxist thinkers and worked on their 'coherence', Gramsci appropriated 'old' concepts from the Marxist classics of his day and subtly transformed

¹⁷ This point was eloquently (and continuously) emphasised by Raymond Williams in his interviews with Anderson and other members of the *New Left Review* in the volume *Politics and Letters*. Cf. Williams 1979. Bottomore 1983 provides the best overview in English of the Marxist 'vocabulary', while Labica and Bensussan (eds.) 1985 provides a longer treatment. *Das Historisch-Kritische Wörterbuch des Marxismus (HKWM)*, upon completion, will constitute the most exhaustive international reference work.

them, or even, sometimes, gave them wholly new meanings. Nothing should be taken for granted by a reader who would avoid turning this clear critical procedure into a labyrinth. Only after determining the precise meaning and status of concepts within Gramsci's discourse itself, no matter how seemingly familiar, can we safely proceed.

3.1.3. State, integral state, political society

Perhaps the most striking example of the need to attend carefully to Gramsci's usage of 'known' Marxist concepts is his conjugation of the concepts of the state and civil society. As we have seen, Anderson argued that there was a 'semantic shift' in Gramsci's definition of the state, oscillating between three alternatives:

State contrasts with Civil Society

State encompasses Civil Society

State is identical with Civil Society.¹⁸

And, indeed, citations can be found in the *Prison Notebooks* that seem to correspond to each of these characterisations. Or can they? Anderson's equations and reading of the texts from which evidence for them is deduced depend upon the implicit assumption that the underlying, 'traditional' binary of state/civil society—despite 'semantic shifts', oscillation of the relationships between terms and the definitions of each of them—remains a normative Marxist standard by which to assess any theoretical model of the state. Yet it is precisely this assumption that is placed in question by the logic of Gramsci's conceptual and empirical explorations.

'Anderson's error', as Francioni demonstrated, 'consists precisely in believing that, in the diverse texts to which he refers, the notion of the State is *the same*'.¹⁹ This assertion depends upon the unargued assumption that different concepts used by Gramsci—such as the state, integral state, political society—'are used as synonyms'.²⁰ However, as Francioni and, similarly,

¹⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

¹⁹ Francioni 1984, p. 198.

²⁰ Ibid.

Buci-Glucksmann argued, the first emergence of the concept of the 'integral State' in Q 4, § 38, written in October 1930 (with a second version in Q 13, § 18, written in late 1932 or 1933), marks

a point of no return: the dialectical 'identity-distinction between civil society and political society' (Q 8, § 142 [April 1932]) produces an *enlarged* concept of the State in which the poles of such unity are included: they are 'the constitutive elements of the state in an organic and larger sense (*State properly called and civil society*)' (Q 6, § 187 [December 1931]).²¹

Anderson did indeed quote one of the central passages in which this new concept—new in comparison not only to Gramsci's precarceral texts, but also to the Marxist tradition of state theory as a whole—was elaborated: 'The State (in its integral meaning) is dictatorship + hegemony'.²² Here, the tip of the iceberg of Gramsci's state theory is clearly sighted; but Anderson failed either to register the mass of research that lie underneath it or even, surprisingly, to note that the 'integral State' was a new concept at all. Failure to note its emergence and importance, particularly the new problematic that it defines, makes it difficult to grasp the true novelty in Gramsci's state theory. In other words, Anderson's critique of Gramsci's third model of the state—his most important and 'integral' concept of the state, within the overall logic of the *Prison Notebooks*—is not a critique of Gramsci's fully developed concept. Rather, as is evident in Anderson's reliance upon a critique of Althusser's theory of ISAs, in order to argue this point, it is much more a critique of another concept of the state that, while seemingly similar, in fact departs in certain key respects from Gramsci's dialectical conception.

We will see in the next chapters that the concept of the integral state has its own very precise meaning, derivable neither from Croce nor Althusser. It is a

²¹ Francioni 1984, p. 196. Francioni's italics. Francioni mistakenly referenced the second passage from the *Prison Notebooks* as Q 6, § 187 rather than Q 6, § 87.

²² Curiously, Anderson glossed this in this way: 'the distinction between civil and political society disappears altogether: consent and coercion alike become co-extensive with the State' (Anderson 1976a, p. 25). No such conclusion is valid on the basis of this text, taken on its own (to say nothing of a philologically accurate reading of this statement in context). A specific combination of dictatorship (coercion) and hegemony (consent) may well produce the specificity of the state, but this does not in itself discount the possibility of other specific combinations, differently configured and balanced, producing non-state social forms.

part of 'a redefinition of some fundamental concepts of the Marxist tradition in order to confront the question of the state in terms that are closer to the political and institutional complexity of the capitalist West',²³ founded upon the postulate, invoked by Anderson himself, of 'the integral unity of capitalist State power'.²⁴ In order to understand its 'integral' meaning in Gramsci's discourse, it is necessary to note with philological precision the time of its emergence and consolidation, and the way these fundamentally transform the entire theoretical problematic within which Gramsci discusses the state. Gramsci provides a clear if complex Ariadne's thread for the attentive reader to follow his discussions of state theory; but, if this is not followed, the reader will undoubtedly become lost in a labyrinth in which semantic similarity is taken to imply conceptual identity.

3.1.4. Base and superstructure, superstructures and ideologies

Another particularly telling example of Gramsci's redefinition of supposedly 'known' Marxist concepts is his version of the base and superstructure metaphor, especially the latter term of this infamous binary. As we have seen, Althusser objected in particularly strident terms to Gramsci's suggestion that certain aspects of scientific theories or categories might belong to the superstructure. Gramsci had written, 'Also science is a superstructure'.²⁵ Althusser responded: 'Science can no more be ranged within the category "superstructure" than can language, which as Stalin showed escapes it'.²⁶ For the early Althusser, the superstructure was fundamentally ideological, and thus not a form of knowledge at all. Rather, it was an organic 'secretion' of a given society that affirmed and mimetically reproduced it in its immediate obviousness.²⁷

²³ Francioni 1984, p. 195.

²⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 57.

²⁵ Q 4, §7.

²⁶ Althusser 1969, p. 133. Althusser's substantive argument preceding this unfortunate appeal to authority was no less spurious: 'In fact, this is to attribute to the concept "superstructure" a breadth Marx never allowed, for he only ranged within it: (1) the politico-legal superstructure, and (2) the ideological superstructure (the corresponding "forms of social consciousness"): except in his Early Works (especially the 1844 *Manuscripts*), Marx never included scientific knowledge in it' (Althusser 1969, p. 133). What Marx 'allowed', of course, resolves the question of the nature of the superstructure just as little what Stalin 'showed'.

²⁷ Althusser 1969, p. 232.

The concept of science outlined in *Reading 'Capital'*, on the other hand, claimed a more rigorous, independent and critical status.

Science [...] may well arise from an ideology, detach itself from its field in order to constitute itself as a science, but precisely this detachment, this 'break', inaugurates a new form of historical existence and temporality which together save science [...] from the common fate of a single history: that of the 'historical bloc' unifying structure and superstructure.²⁸

Althusser understood the term superstructure here in (a version of) its 'traditional' sense, as epistemologically erroneous 'forms of social consciousness' that worked to ratify and reinforce a given form of social organisation: the ideas of the ruling class as the ruling ideas of any epoch. His mistake was the same as Anderson's in the previous example of the concept of the state: he assumed that Gramsci was using the concept according to what Althusser himself understood to be its 'standard' Marxist definition. Once more, however, it was precisely such naïve obviousness that the dynamic of the *Prison Notebooks* places so radically in question. Gramsci does indeed include science and (even more so) language among the superstructures: language, understood in historical and political terms, in fact comes to figure as the paradigmatic instance of the superstructural for Gramsci. However, he first fundamentally redefines the concept of 'superstructure' and strips it of the mechanistic and metaphysical encrustations that had been ascribed to it during the period of Marxism's diffusion and vulgarisation (in both its negative and positive senses). At the same time, he proposes his own distinctive definition of ideology in a 'neutral' and, arguably, also 'positive' sense.²⁹

Contrary to a common misperception regarding Gramsci's supposed 'culturalism', he does not simply dispense with the *Basis/Überbau* metaphor as irremediably tainted by 'economism'. On the contrary, in the early phases of his research, he appears to employ the coupling in ways that seem consonant with quite 'orthodox' understandings, albeit with significant specifications and extensions.³⁰ However, Gramsci's encounter with the 1859 'Preface' to the

²⁸ Althusser 1969, p. 133.

²⁹ On Gramsci's concepts of ideology in relation to other Marxist traditions, cf. Rehmann 2004, Rehmann 2008 (especially pp. 82–101) and Liguori 2004a.

³⁰ Thus the note 'Structure and Superstructure' (Q 4, § 12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6), contains reflections that seem to emerge from an acceptance of the 'determining' status of the

Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy, supplemented by the *Theses on Feuerbach*,³¹ soon sees him reformulate it as ‘the crucial problem of historical materialism’,³² a fundamental criterion of ‘historical-political research’.³³ Modifying a phrase from Buci-Glucksmann, I propose to refer to this as Gramsci ‘politico-gnoseological thesis’ of the reality and efficacy of ideologies.³⁴ By reformulating the *Basis/Überbau* metaphor as a dialectic of identity / distinction, Gramsci thus gives the lie simultaneously to a series of interpretative traditions within and outside Marxism: on the one hand, both Second-International and Stalinist instrumentalisations in the sense of a ‘progressivist’ ideology, as well as those leftist currents that have condemned the 1859 ‘Preface’ as a residue of the supposed teleology and essentialism of the young Marx; on the other hand,

former term in the ‘traditional’ binary, though Gramsci’s addition of a third term—the notion of the ‘material structure of the superstructure’ (cf. Q 11, §29)—immediately complicates his analysis, soon developed in relation to the concept of ‘hegemonic apparatus’ (cf. Chapter Six).

³¹ Liguori 2004a, pp. 134–7 argues that, alongside these two texts, Gramsci’s formulation of a positive notion of ideology was assisted by two further factors: first, the late Engels’s anti-deterministic development of base/superstructure relations, or notion of determination ‘in the last instance’ (cf. Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 49, pp. 34–5; for Gramsci’s reference to these texts, cf. Q 4, §26); and, second, Lenin’s ‘neutral’ definition of ideology in general, bifurcated into bourgeois and proletarian variants, in such texts as *What Is to Be Done?* Liguori further notes that Gramsci did not have access to the text of Marx and Engels in which a critical notion of ideology is developed, and which has come to define the most well-known ‘Marxist’ concept of ideology: *The German Ideology*. It was, in fact, only partially published in the period of Gramsci’s incarceration. Cf. Liguori 2004a, p. 132.

³² Q 4, §38.

³³ Q 1, §44.

³⁴ I have preferred the term ‘gnoseology’ to ‘epistemology’ because, whereas the latter is associated with the so-called ‘problem of knowledge’ (more precisely, the problem of the production of knowledge), the former refers more generally to the effective reality [*Wirklichkeit*] of human relations of knowledge. For an alternative account that inscribes Gramsci in the modern epistemological tradition, cf. Nemeth 1980. Buci-Glucksmann argued that ‘if the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach thus opens up a new path, this is precisely because philosophical positions have their effects in all practices, and that all practices contain knowledge effects—a dual dialectic [...] I propose to call this double process the gnoseology of politics’; she immediately specified that this was ‘not a “political gnoseology”, which would fall into the trap of a reduction of gnoseology to politics’ (Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 349). A subsequent note indicated that this caution owed not a little to fears of Stalinist instrumentalisation or reduction of ‘properly’ epistemological concerns to political-institutional criteria (p. 357). In Gramsci’s case, however, the concern is unnecessary, because he redefines politics not in narrow terms of institutional power but as the reality of the transformation of human social relations and practices. If we keep this in mind, the concept of a ‘politico-gnoseological’ thesis of the reality and efficacy of ideologies allows us to emphasise the way in which Gramsci insists upon human knowledge as a practice (and not as reflection or ‘passive’ speculation).

he also refutes attempts to define retrospectively a 'classical' Marxist theoretical model based on interpretations of the notion of a 'mode of production' and different articulations of 'relations of production' and 'productive forces'.³⁵ Gramsci demonstrates that this difficult metaphor does not have 'an in-built tendency to lead the mind towards reductionism' (as one of historical materialism's most able practitioners, E.P. Thompson, once argued), but, rather, in at least one version, opens onto political practice as Marxism's Archimedean point.³⁶

Gramsci translated the 1859 'Preface' in the early years of his incarceration. As Cospito notes,

Gramsci returns to this text numerous times in the course of his carceral reflection, progressively distancing himself from its deterministic interpretation and even using it [the text] in order to combat such an interpretation.³⁷

Key phrases from it function as veritable touchstones to which he continually returns in order to understand the distinctive elements of the philosophy of praxis. In the process, he redefines some of its most famous tropes, including the spatial-constructivist metaphor of a superstructure 'arising' on the foundation of an (economic) structure. Marx had written:

The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.³⁸

³⁵ In different ways, both Althusser's and Cohen's attempted reconstructions of Marx focused upon these categories and argued that they represented the hard core of the Marxist research programme, considered in its scientific dimensions. Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1970, particularly pp. 209–24; Cohen 2000, particularly pp. 28–87.

³⁶ Cf. Thompson 1979, p. 18. Thompson's position developed in the context of his long-term struggle against what he understood as Stalinism and the 'debts of 1956', reaching a crescendo in his influential critique of Althusser, 'The Poverty of Theory' in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (Thompson 1978). Perry Anderson later provided a nuanced discussion of the theoretical gains and losses of this move in *Arguments within English Marxism* (Anderson 1980). For another sophisticated discussion, cf. also Palmer 1994.

³⁷ Cospito 2004, p. 231. Cospito argues that Gramsci progressively abandons the 'architectonic metaphor' of the *Basis/Überbau* dyad, thus moving away from an initial economistic mechanist position not far from that of, for instance, Bukharin. While it is true that the coupling itself figures less prominently in later phases of Gramsci's research, the new concept of the 'superstructures' becomes ever more important as the *Prison Notebooks* progresses, as we will see.

³⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 29, p. 263; trans. modified.

Gramsci, on the other hand, comes to speak of the *superstructures* (in the plural). He also extends the term to include not only legal and political forms but, ultimately, all of the forms in which classes know and comprehend the conditions of their struggle within a determinate social formation. His stimulus for this was the

the affirmation of Marx [...] that ‘men become conscious (of this conflict) on the ideological terrain’ of juridical, political, religious, artistic and philosophical forms. But is this consciousness limited to the conflict between the material forces of production and the relations of production—according to the letter of Marx’s text—or does it refer to every consciousness, that is, to all knowledge? This is the problem: which can be resolved with the entire ensemble of the philosophical doctrine of the value of the ideological superstructures.³⁹

Clearly, Gramsci has combined Marx’s previously quoted formulation with another, equally famous formulation that soon follows upon it in the ‘Preface’, in what Liguori has described as ‘a dilated reading of the 1859 “Preface”’.⁴⁰

With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.⁴¹

Gramsci understands the superstructures in this sense, as ‘ideological forms’; as his research progress, the terms ‘superstructures’ and ‘ideologies’ become almost synonymous. This produces new positive definitions of both concepts that have often been understood, both before and after Gramsci, in a largely negative sense.⁴²

³⁹ Q 4, §37; *SPN*, pp. 371–2.

⁴⁰ Liguori 2004a, p. 134 et sqq.

⁴¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 29, p. 263.

⁴² This identification is most noticeable in the second version of the note declaring the superstructural status of science to which Althusser objected. There, Gramsci writes: ‘but in reality, also science is a superstructure, an ideology’ (Q 11, §38; *FSPN*, p. 293).

As with so many of his concepts, a decisive development occurs when Gramsci engages with Croce's one-sided critique of one-sided degenerations of Marx's legacy. One of the central features of Croce's critique of Marx was the charge, often subsequently repeated in less sophisticated forms, that Marx's focus upon the relations of production obliterated the autonomy of other elements of social life. The economy became a 'hidden god' and Marxism a disguised metaphysics. Developing his critique of Croce's own metaphysical foundations—that is, his speculative method—Gramsci responded that

if the concept of structure is conceived 'speculatively', it certainly becomes a 'hidden God'; but it doesn't need to be conceived speculatively, but rather, historically, as the ensemble of social relations in which real men move and operate, as an ensemble of objective conditions that can and must be studied with the methods of 'philology'.⁴³

The accusation that the superstructure for Marx was merely 'phenomenal', preceded and strictly determined by the 'real' of the structure, thus similarly fell by the wayside.

The claim that we are dealing with 'appearance' has no transcendent and metaphysical significance whatsoever, but is the simple statement of its 'historicity', of its 'death-life' status, of its taking on a transient nature because a new, higher and more comprehensive, social and moral consciousness is being developed and is emerging as the sole 'life', the sole 'reality' as compared to a dead past that is, at the same time, a long time dying.⁴⁴

Gramsci thus comprehends 'the superstructures' or 'ideologies' in a non-reductive sense—that is, he views the superstructures not as mechanically derived from an originary 'base', but as constituting a dialectical unity or 'historical bloc' with the dominant relations of production, the means by which they were organised, guaranteed, and made to endure (or, just as importantly, challenged and transformed).⁴⁵ The superstructures are the terrains on which,

⁴³ Q 10I, §8; *FSPN*, p. 347.

⁴⁴ Q 10I, §8; *FSPN*, p. 348. Gramsci's critique of Croce's dismissal of Marxism is discussed extensively in subsequent chapters, particularly Chapters Seven and Eight.

⁴⁵ On the dynamic dimensions of the historical bloc, traversed by hegemonic relations, cf. Boothman 2000, particularly p. 125.

or the forms in which, members of a social group come to 'know' in a particular, 'practical' way the determining conditions of their lives within a particular historical situation. This is to say that they are necessary (or organic), rather than adventitious, to any social formation constituted by contradictions between classes;⁴⁶ and that they have an extensive social efficacy, rather than being individually idiosyncratic, or dependent upon an individual knowing subject (or group conceived as subject) fallen into error.⁴⁷ In a strict sense, for Gramsci, there is *no* knowledge outside the superstructures—or, what is the same thing, the ideologies—for the simple reason that such an outside does not exist: 'ideas do not fall from the sky', in Labriola's memorable phrase, but are historically produced as a social relation.⁴⁸ Thus, when Gramsci says that a form of knowledge is superstructural (ideological), this should not be understood in a negative sense, as the absence of 'clear and distinct ideas'. Rather, it points to the political status of these forms, or the political overdetermination of knowledge itself, within an historicist perspective. As we will see in subsequent chapters, not even philosophy is safe from inclusion in this conception of ideology: in fact, Gramsci, insists that philosophy too is a superstructure or an ideology, without in any way undervaluing its 'truth'. Thus, when Gramsci argues that 'also science is a superstructure', this statement has a precise meaning: also science is one of the forms in which members of classes come to know the struggle in which they are engaged—as we shall see in Chapter Eight, in a very particular and efficacious way.

⁴⁶ Gramsci's concept of ideology is thus a 'precursor' of Althusser's 'non-theoreticist' conception of ideology; already present in his early work (cf. 'Marxism and Humanism' in *For Marx*), this tendency was strengthened in the late 1960s, particularly in Althusser's explorations of the ideological state apparatuses. Cf. the following formulation from Althusser's self-critique: 'Ideologies are not pure illusions (Error), but bodies of representations existing in institutions and practices: they figure in the superstructure, and are rooted in class struggle' (Althusser 1976, p. 155). There nevertheless still exist significant differences between the revised Althusserian concept and Gramsci's 'integral' notion of the superstructures/ideologies: whereas Althusser continues to insist on 'Ideology in general' and the ideological as transhistorical categories, Gramsci's pluralisation of these terms translates them into the terms of hegemonic struggle and the forging of composite social bodies via the contestation of collective meanings and values.

⁴⁷ Cf. Q 4, §15.

⁴⁸ 'Gramsci translates idealism's Spirit—that is, the historical productions of man, everything that forms his culture—into the ideologies or superstructures of historical materialism' (Frosini 2003, p. 90).

There is a clear distance taken here from prior and subsequent conceptualisations of the relationship between science and the superstructure and from the definition of each term in the Marxist tradition. Gramsci himself, however, precisely notes the distance, clearly indicating his debts and motivations. Rather than being a cause of theoretical confusion, this recourse to concepts and themes that were not Gramsci's own, and the particular way in which he engaged them, provided him with an opportunity for theoretical clarification, simultaneously at different levels of his discourse. They can be objects of confusion only for those readers too impatient to undertake the journey of theoretical practice alongside Gramsci, as his 'conceptual' contemporaries.

3.2. Code language

Anderson's second assumption, namely, that Gramsci adopted a code language in order to evade the scrutiny of the censors, would seem to be upon safer ground. Indeed, the 'codeword thesis' has become something of a shibboleth quietly pronounced at the beginning of most works of Gramscian scholarship, rarely thought to require argumentation or closer inspection. It would seem to be confirmed by even the most cursory inspection of the *unheimlich*—in the strong Freudian sense—vocabulary employed in the *Prison Notebooks*: the philosophy of praxis, the founders of the philosophy of praxis, the critique of political economy, Ilich, Bernstein and so forth. The first edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, published under the editorship of Platone (the task having been delegated by Togliatti, who nevertheless still took an active interest in the publication) went so far as to provide its readership with a 'key' for deciphering Gramsci's codewords. It recalls nothing so much as the allegorical tables of correspondences appended to some modern editions of medieval morality plays or Renaissance masques. Most selected editions in other languages in the early years of the diffusion of Gramsci's thought included a version of it.

The codeword thesis has become one of the verities of Gramscian scholarship, giving rise to all manner of more-or-less forced allegorical reading strategies. Like most prejudices, this thesis has at least some sort of foundation in fact, however distorted. Gramsci was well aware of the non-private status of his correspondence. In a letter to Julia on 7 December 1931, he wrote

my letters are 'public', not restricted to the two of us, and the awareness of this inevitably forces me to curb the explosion of my feelings insofar as they are expressed by the words written in these letters.⁴⁹

Furthermore, at a certain point he did indeed seem to feel menaced, as if he were being so closely guarded and his texts so closely read by the prison censor that he dared not express his thoughts in plain and clear language. In a letter to Tania on 12 July 1932, Gramsci warned her not to speak anymore of anything but 'family matters' (significantly, immediately following a period of intense theoretical exchanges regarding Croce).

This week I have not been able to read anything from you. A registered letter has definitely arrived because it was opened in my presence in order to see whether it contained valuables, but it has not yet been handed to me. Dearest, I've written to you many times that you often don't realize exactly what my conditions of existence are and that you forget what an incarcerated man is. Similarly I have on other occasions written to you that too much zeal is harmful instead of being beneficial. Perhaps I should have insisted a bit more, but at times I just gave up, at seeing how you were unable to understand after all my insinuations. Therefore I think it is useful to insist one more time, warning you: 1) that it is best that in your letters you speak only of family matters, in the clearest and most perspicacious manner possible. Of course you must realize that this clarity should exist not only for you, but for anyone else who might read the letter without knowing the facts to which you refer: clear in fact means that it must not present anything that might appear unclear. 2) That you cannot send me anything, except for linen items. Not that I wish to receive linen items. This is a general warning; I cannot receive anything from the outside, neither foodstuffs, nor tobacco, nor cigarette papers, nor medicines, nor any other item. [...] Take into account the aforementioned warnings and when you write to me exaggerate if necessary on the side of simplicity and paucity of news rather than in the opposite sense, so as to avoid all forms of inconvenience and delay.⁵⁰

From this point on, his letters take a decidedly un-theoretical turn. Their focus becomes the mundane facts of prison life, interspersed with troubled parables

⁴⁹ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 190.

and mixed metaphors that give witness to the profound personal crisis Gramsci struggled to keep in check. According to one hypothesis, the new theoretical vocabulary of the later phases of the research in the *Prison Notebooks* emerged as a reaction against these fears of an increasing malevolence on the part of the Fascist panopticon. Phrases such as the ‘philosophy of praxis’ in the place of ‘Marxism’, according to this perspective, were adopted as a sort of ‘helmet of Hades’ in order to allow Gramsci to continue his journey, ‘advancing masked’.

3.2.1. A helmet of Hades?

The publication of Gerratana’s critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* in 1975, and the intense philological debates that have followed in its wake, have allowed a more complex picture of Gramsci’s supposedly linguistic subterfuges to emerge. Against the romantic image of the defeated revolutionary valiantly but futilely struggling against the doublethink imposed by a totalitarian state apparatus, a more pedestrian—yet also more combative—picture of Gramsci’s carceral exercises has come to light. This picture can be encapsulated in a naïve rhetorical question: did Gramsci—imprisoned by a régime that sought, in the immortal Pyrrhic peroration of the Fascist prosecutor Michele Isgro, to ‘stop this brain from functioning for twenty years’—really believe that encrypted language would help him to hide something that was at any rate already well known? Technicalities would not save him, as Gramsci knew only too well after the revocation of parliamentary immunity that had directly led to his imprisonment; if the régime so chose, incriminating notebooks or not, he would be silenced. Gramsci responded in firm yet steady terms.

I have become convinced that even when everything is or seems lost, one must quietly go back to work, starting again from the beginning. [...] I believe that I am simply an average man who has his own deep convictions and will not trade them away for anything in the world.⁵¹

These are not words of either reckless confrontation or paranoid concealment. Rather, they demonstrate an intention to continue the work, in unpropitious circumstances, but without compromise.

⁵¹ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, pp. 139–40.

Furthermore, the critical edition clearly shows that most supposed ‘code-words’ do not have the deceptive status ascribed to them by the ‘Gramsci legend’. In fact, many are simple abbreviations, as commonly used for recurring terms in any research project, particularly in notes not designed for publication but for personal use. Their use is particularly understandable given the limited paper Gramsci had available for writing each day—every sheet of paper was precious, and any space saved through comprehensible abbreviations of repeated terms was entirely rational. Thus, ‘m.’ is often used for Marxism, ‘M.’ for Marx, ‘mat. stor.’ for *materialismo storico*. Significantly, these routine abbreviations are used throughout the early phases of Gramsci’s work, that is, before mid-1932, when his fear (objectively justified or expression of his ongoing ‘molecular’ personal crisis) supposedly prompted him to hide behind the camouflage of his more famous and grand eloquent codewords. Equally significantly, as the perceptive reader will have noted, these abbreviations are quite rapidly deciphered, presumably even by the half- or un-educated eye of somebody who was, after all, only a dull provincial prison officer.

3.2.2. From ‘m.’ to the ‘philosophy of praxis’

Above all, the critical edition has finally allowed a new generation of readers to see the extent to which Gramsci’s distinctive terminology was motivated by substantial concerns *at least as important* as the need to deceive his enemies. Here, as Wolfgang Fritz Haug has argued, ‘the codeword thesis [*Tarnwortthese*] itself’ has functioned as a form of ‘camouflage [*Tarnung*]’ adopted in order to deceive a censor—though not that of Mussolini’s régime.⁵² For example, it is commonly held that the ‘philosophy of praxis’ is ‘merely’ Gramsci’s idiosyncratic term for ‘Marxism’, a term that he could not write due to fear of the prison censor. One of the consequences of this assertion is that Gramsci’s position is thereby much more easily amalgamated with whatever substantive definition of Marxism is proposed. In the postwar period of the first edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, this meant only one thing: Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. It is not our task here to pass judgement on the complex political calculations that prompted Togliatti and others, in a period of intense diplomatic manoeuvres concerning the relationship of the PCI to the international Communist move-

⁵² Haug 1999, p. 1208.

ment and its ideological line, to adopt the strategy of presenting their chief ideologist as essentially compatible, despite Latinate rhetorical excesses and imprecision of a superficial nature, with such orthodoxy.⁵³ It is sufficient to note that, viewed philologically, the term clearly was not intended to be and is not a synonym for what was then or what has now come to be known as Marxism. It is neither distinct from Marxism (as some post-Marxists have wished, or some self-appointed defenders of orthodoxy have charged), nor identical with it (as the Togliatti-Platone edition asserted). Rather, the term 'philosophy of praxis' was deliberately chosen in order to specify a particular tendency within Marx's legacy, which Gramsci's intervention proposed to strengthen, elaborate, and, ultimately, make hegemonic within the organised working-class movement.

For Gramsci does in fact use the term 'Marxism' on numerous occasions in the early notebooks, the period in which, one would assume, he was at his most vigilant to guard the recently hard-won permission to have writing materials made available to him. Thus, in a note composed between July-October 1929, Gramsci argues that Loria 'isn't an individual terratological case', but 'the most complete and finished specimen of a series of representatives [...] who more or less believe that they are deepening, correcting, or overcoming Marxism'.⁵⁴ In another note from mid-1930, Labriola is praised as 'the only who has sought to give a scientific basis to historical materialism'.⁵⁵ A note from May 1930 is even entitled 'Two Aspects of Marxism'.⁵⁶ The immediately following notes similarly advertise the political allegiance of their author in their titles. In transcriptions and revisions of these notes in later notebooks (C texts, according to Gerratana's classification), the 'philosophy of praxis' is systematically substituted for the earlier 'Marxism'.⁵⁷ According to the codeword thesis, this 'synonym' was formulated in order to evade increasing external surveillance,

⁵³ Against the recent tendency, subsequent to Gerratana's critical edition, to pass (easy) judgment on Togliatti's diplomatic manoeuvres (cf. e.g. Rossi and Vacca 2007), it is worthwhile recalling—as Guido Liguori has emphasised—that, without Togliatti's intervention, there would perhaps have been no first edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, and thus no 'Gramsci' at all (Liguori 2006, p. 124 et sqq.). It is indubitable that Togliatti did indeed 'instrumentalise' Gramsci's thought, just as any interpretation 'instrumentalises' a text for purposes distinct from those of its author; but the debate over Togliatti's particular interpretative choices is more properly conducted at a substantive rather than formal level.

⁵⁴ Q 1, §25.

⁵⁵ Q 3, §31.

⁵⁶ Q 4, §3.

⁵⁷ Respectively, Q 28, §1; Q 11, §70; Q 16, §9.

prompting in turn an increasing self-censorship. Clearly, a certain amount of ‘importuning’ of the texts (both those of the *Prison Notebooks* and the *Letters*) is necessary in order to sustain this position.

But the *Prison Notebooks* are not a medieval morality play or a modern edition of Dante’s *Commedia*. Much easier and more rational than the codeword thesis is to come to the obvious conclusion: when Gramsci writes ‘philosophy of praxis’, he does not mean ‘Marxism’, or, more exactly, he does not *simply* mean ‘Marxism’, understood as all of the initiatives undertaken, more-or-less faithful to the works of Marx, by different tendencies of the Marxist tradition. Rather, he means, precisely, the ‘philosophy of praxis’. We can, in fact, chart quite precisely the emergence of this term in Gramsci’s vocabulary, as the signifier of a substantially new position, related to but distinct from positions previously comprehended in an older language.⁵⁸ In the early phases of his research, he continues to use the appellation ‘Marxism’. However, he does deploy the term ‘philosophy of praxis’ in relation to thinkers traditionally seen as outside the canon of Marxist authors. In particular, he argues that Machiavelli’s thought

could be called a ‘philosophy of praxis’ or ‘neo-humanism’, in as much as it does not recognise transcendent or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements, but bases itself entirely on the concrete action of man, who, impelled by historical necessity, works and transforms reality.⁵⁹

Only then does he begin to appropriate it to describe the philosophy of Marxism, and Marxism *tout court*.

The decisive text for the emergence of the term the ‘philosophy of praxis’ is written between February and November 1931⁶⁰—that is, possibly almost eighteen months *before* Gramsci writes to Tania of his sense of increased surveillance. Significantly, this is the same notebook in which Gramsci had earlier translated the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Setting out from the title ‘Materialism and Historical Materialism’ and proceeding by way of a discussion of vulgar or naïve forms of materialism, Gramsci then presents his own position.

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Fritz Haug has reconstructed in great detail the gradual emergence of this term in his ‘Introduction’ to Volume 6 of the German critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* [*die Gefängnishefte*]. Cf. Haug 1999, pp. 1195–221. An alternative detailed reconstruction is Frosini 2003, pp. 93–111.

⁵⁹ Q 5, §127; SPN, pp. 248–9.

⁶⁰ Q 7, §35.

In this way we arrive also at the equality of, or equation between, 'philosophy and politics', thought and action, that is, at a philosophy of praxis. Everything is political, even philosophy or philosophies (cf. the notes on the character of ideologies) and the only 'philosophy' is history in action, that is, life itself.⁶¹

If this is a codeword, it is a particularly bad one, because Gramsci provides the key for its deciphering in the very title of the note in which it first appears.

Gramsci continues to explore the philosophical and political precision contained in the new nomenclature throughout Notebooks Seven and Eight. By the time of notebooks ten and eleven from 1932 and early 1933 (that is, precisely the period of growing worries regarding censorship),

the 'philosophy of praxis' has now become the proper name of the project of a new integral Marxist way of practising philosophy, an appellation that simultaneously encompasses the Marxist classics, or historical materialism, and Marxism *per se*.⁶²

Rather than a codeword of any type, therefore, or even a mere idiosyncratic synonym, the philosophy of praxis is, as Frosini has argued, the 'very personal version of Marxism that Gramsci elaborates in prison in discontinuity also with his own prior thought'.⁶³ It was his distinctive intervention into the post-Lenin conjunctural debates about the future development of Marxist theory, debates that unfortunately were unable to consider Gramsci's contribution. This concept is representative of the other terminological novelties introduced by Gramsci into the Marxist tradition: a formal addition necessitated by a substantial transformation at the level of conceptual content. Just as with the concepts he appropriated from other thinkers, Marxist and non-Marxist, there is precision in Gramsci's development and deployment of his own concepts, processes whose different stages and particular times can and must be philologically verified.

⁶¹ Q 7, § 35; *SPN*, p. 357. This is the same note in which Gramsci signals Lenin's theorisation and realisation of hegemony as a great 'metaphysical event', thus constituting what I have defined as the beginning of the 'Gramscian moment'.

⁶² Haug 1999, p. 1199.

⁶³ Frosini 2003, p. 16.

3.3. Hieroglyphs

Anderson's third and fourth assumptions—namely, that there was a 'hidden order' that could be reconstructed to reveal that which Gramsci really intended to say, but which could only be discerned in the form of 'hieroglyphs' due to the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the text—call for considerations of another order. These were, in fact, the fundamental assumptions of Anderson's essay, on the basis of which he proposed to begin from selected passages that represented, if not Gramsci's chronological point of departure, then at least 'the most cogent synthesis of the essential terms of Gramsci's theoretical universe, which elsewhere are dispersed and scattered throughout the notebooks'.⁶⁴ These assumptions also account for the winding and exploratory nature of Anderson's investigative procedure. The scent of Gramsci's vernacular was everywhere, dispersed throughout the fragments, but his lair was nowhere to be found. In this, Anderson merely echoed previous bewildered judgements of the fragmentary nature of the *Prison Notebooks*. This perception provided a powerful impetus to the early years of Gramscian scholarship, much of which was dominated by debates that claimed to establish with greater precision what Gramsci 'really' said.⁶⁵ Time and again, however, critics would be forced to concede that the famous fragmentary literary form of the *Prison Notebooks*, seemingly permitting a range of hypotheses that could all, with varying degrees of legitimacy, be ascribed to Gramsci's text, did not permit a definitive assessment.

Was Croce therefore correct to describe Gramsci's work as a miscellany of 'barely developed ideas', 'questions to himself', 'often unsubstantiated suppositions'? Are the *Prison Notebooks* really such a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma? Does there really lie, somewhere beyond or outside the text Gramsci compiled in prison, a completed and systematic treatise, an ideal book that proceeds logically and completes the seemingly disjointed series of observations and notebooks that Gramsci actually wrote? If Anderson's (and many other critics') assertions are correct, the task of a reading of the *Prison Notebooks* would indeed be to see beyond such mutilated imitations to the completed

⁶⁴ Anderson 1976a, pp. 7–8.

⁶⁵ Cf. Liguori 1996.

form which history conspired to deny to us, in order to reconstruct ‘the true obliterated text of [Gramsci’s] thought’.⁶⁶

3.3.1. ‘Für Ewig ...’

Gramsci himself would seem to authorise such a perspective. In a famous letter written to his sister-in-law a little over four months after his arrest, on 19 March 1927, Gramsci declared himself to be

obsessed (this is a phenomenon typical of people in jail, I think) by this idea: that I should do something *für ewig*, following a complex concept of Goethe’s that as I remember tormented our Pascoli a great deal. In short, in keeping with a pre-established programme, I would like to concentrate myself intensely and systematically on some subject that would absorb and provide a centre to my inner life.⁶⁷

Clearly and understandably, ‘the problem of study presented itself to him initially like a system of self-defence against the danger of intellectual degradation by which he felt himself threatened’.⁶⁸ He proceeded to outline four principal themes: formation of Italian intellectuals,⁶⁹ comparative linguistics, transformation of Italian theatre (particularly the role of Pirandello) and popular literature. The selection of themes may, at first sight, appear to be arbitrary and idiosyncratic, even, perhaps, according to certain definitions of the terms, ‘cultural’ rather than ‘political’. Certainly, they would seem to be a long way removed from the debates of the Comintern in which Gramsci had participated in the early twenties or even—his reference to that text notwithstanding—the

⁶⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 83.

⁶⁸ Gerratana 1975, p. xv.

⁶⁹ It was in fact this theme to which Gramsci referred when specifying the Goethean motto. ‘Do you remember my very hasty and quite superficial essay on southern Italy and on the importance of B. Croce? Well, I would like to fully develop in depth the thesis that I sketched out then, from a “disinterested”, “*für ewig*” point of view’ (Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 83). In other words, he aimed to work up theses written in moments stolen from the life of the professional revolutionary into a more satisfying form, which, he hoped, would yield results of more enduring validity and insight. ‘*Für ewig*’, then, should be read as an ironic, almost mock-heroic, reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of his precarceral studies and on the very different temporality to which he now found himself subjected, making a virtue of necessity.

more directly political focus of *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*, penned immediately prior to his arrest.

Yet, as Gramsci immediately went on to note, ‘fundamentally, if you look closely, there is homogeneity between these four arguments: they are based in an equal measure on the creative popular spirit, in its diverse phases and grades of development’.⁷⁰ ‘Creative popular spirit’ should be understood here in the broadest possible sense, indicating not merely the role of intellectuals or artists of various types but the wider social processes of which they were representative. It is in this sense that the themes of theatre and popular literature are proposed, as particularly revealing symptoms of the processes by means of which a disparate and divided population was forged into a relatively unitary ‘people’. As Fabio Frosini has emphasised, the element that these themes have in common lies ‘*in the perspective according to which they are confronted: that is, the perspective of the formation of the nation-state and the interaction, in such process, between intellectuals and the people*’.⁷¹ More precisely: the perspective of the formation of a particular state at a particular time—namely, the Italian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and the complex relations of overdetermination, mutual implication and formative function of various elements that constituted its social cement and, ultimately, *differentia specifica* as a particular social formation. In short, ‘creative popular spirit’ stands here as a ‘codeword’ for Gramsci’s acceptance of the late Lenin’s challenge: ‘a reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society’.⁷²

This programme is still actively pursued in the enumeration of sixteen clearly defined fields of research on the first page of Gramsci’s first notebook on 8 February 1929. This list would seem to be the outline for a text, or a series of texts, which aspired to the status of a completed and definitive work in the traditional sense. Yet, throughout his research, Gramsci continually states that these are but provisional notes: ‘this needs to be checked’, ‘this calls for further study’, ‘one needs to ascertain this fact’ are variations on one of the most recurring motifs of the *Prison Notebooks*.⁷³ As his research

⁷⁰ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 84.

⁷¹ Frosini 2003, p. 32.

⁷² Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 238.

⁷³ Cf., e.g., Q 11; *FSPN*, p. lxxxii.

progresses, his awareness of these limitations increases to almost disabling dimensions. As Frosini stresses,

in the course of two years, between 1930 and 1932, the warnings that urge possible future readers to be cautious are repeated, deepened; they become almost an invitation to undervalue the theoretical importance of the *Prison Notebooks*.⁷⁴

It would seem that Gramsci had abandoned his original programme, stoically accepting the limitations imposed upon him by prison conditions and contenting himself with sketches to be worked up on a happier day—which, of course, never came.

The end result, as Gerratana notes, was the fragmentary series of

very many notes, notes and *aides-mémoire* of reviews he had read or of books to read or to consult, short notes and ample annotations of preparatory materials for a series of essays to be written according to a well thought-out plan, but which were never written.⁷⁵

The contrast is striking: the desire to do something *für ewig*; scribbles which bear all too strongly the scars of their moment. Gramsci's wish to produce something definitive for posterity seems to be defeated by the resultant labyrinth or labyrinths of fragments, and we the readers to be cheated by the cruel contingencies made necessary by history. Viewed in this light, reconstruction seems legitimate and, in fact, the only option for a coherent reading of the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci had a master plan and the reader must judiciously choose between the different temporally inflected versions of it, in order to locate Gramsci's 'true', but still only potential, text. In this sense, philology would function as the restoration of pure form. It is not clear, however, according to what criteria such restoration would be undertaken, other than the instincts or impressions of each individual reader.

⁷⁴ Frosini 2003, p. 74.

⁷⁵ Gerratana 1997, p. xii.

3.3.2. Three phases of work

3.3.2.1. First phase

Gramsci did not, in fact, simply abandon his original plan. Rather, he transformed and re-articulated it in at least *three main phases of work*, all of which remained similarly incomplete.⁷⁶ In the *first* phase of writing, from February 1929 to the beginning of 1932 (a phase which arguably also includes the period from Gramsci's arrest to the beginning of the first notebook, that is, the period prior to receiving permission to write), Gramsci works on and completes thirteen notebooks—four containing his translations of, among other texts, Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and the 1859 'Preface' to the *Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy* (signalled as notebooks A–D in Gerratana's critical edition and therefore excluded from the numerical order), and the nine 'miscellaneous' notebooks that stand at the beginning of the critical edition.⁷⁷ Initiated in these nine notebooks are a series of titles that correspond to the previously mentioned themes, indicating that Gramsci is clearly progressing according to his previously delineated plans. To characterise these texts as 'incomplete' would be something of a category mistake, for not only were they clearly not intended to be polished and finished studies, but the majority of them do not even seem to have been conceived as rough drafts for such studies. Rather, they are exploratory notes, delineating lines of research, highlighting themes to be pursued and annotating bibliographical material, of the type that forms the foundation for any serious research project. The sheer mass of them and their scope indicates the ambitiousness of Gramsci's researches and the expansion of the concept of the 'creative popular spirit', clearly incapable of being contained in any one final text or even articulated series of organically related texts.

⁷⁶ In what follows, I rely heavily upon Fabio Frosini's periodisation of the work on the *Prison Notebooks*, substantially in accord with the pioneering work of Gerratana and Francioni's influential 'revisionist' theses, while providing some significant refinements and specifications on certain decisive questions. Cf. Frosini 2003, in particular pp. 23–9.

⁷⁷ These translation notebooks have now been published in Gramsci 2007a—the first offering of the long planned 'National Edition' of Gramsci's complete works.

3.3.2.2. *Second phase*

Towards the middle of 1932—that is, *precisely in the period of the letter to Tania suggesting increasing censorship*—it seems that Gramsci feels a growing confidence in his powers, intellectual if not physical. Combatively, as if challenging the frustrations of censorship, he decides to set his house in order, systematising the previous fragments into more coherent wholes. The terms and main themes of the previous phase of work are continued. The particular constellation in which they are articulated, and the way of articulating them, however, seem to have undergone an intensification, as if Gramsci, in a moment of inspiration, had glimpsed their hidden architecture and determined to realise it. In this *second* phase, from the middle of 1932 to the middle of 1933, Gramsci works on the four so-called ‘special notebooks’ (10–13 in Gerratana’s edition) and begins three further miscellaneous notebooks (14, 15, 17). Viewed from a certain perspective, the four special notebooks of this period may be regarded as the ‘living soul’ of the *Prison Notebooks*, the moment in which Gramsci came closest to his ideal of doing something *für ewig*. The majority of notes from these notebooks are in fact significant revisions of the rough outlines and tentative suggestions contained in texts from the first phases, supplemented by significant new departures necessitated by the new organisation and economy into which they were projected. Notebook Ten is dedicated to the critique of the philosophy of Benedetto Croce, seemingly the *Anti-Croce* Gramsci had previously announced; Notebook Eleven, starting off from the critique of Bukharin, seems to grow into Gramsci’s own introductory text on (Marxist) philosophy; Notebook Twelve gathers together and elaborates further Gramsci’s notes on one of his abiding concerns, the study of the history of the intellectuals; and Notebook Thirteen, on Machiavelli, seemingly provides the political summit to this daunting ascent through the most difficult of philosophical and historiographical themes. Yet even these notebooks continue the fragmentary and incomplete style of the earlier notebooks, their confident progression not infrequently held in check by cautionary notes, reversals, revisiting of seemingly solved problems, *aporiai*.

A serious crisis of health on 7 March 1933, prefigured by a dwindling of energy in the preceding months, effectively closes this phase that had been characterised by the intense work of reorganisation and theoretical elaboration of the special notebooks. Gramsci struggles to bring these notebooks

to some state, if not of completion, then at least, *à la* Valéry, of 'abandonment'. One senses Gramsci's exhaustion in the very texture of the prose itself. The measured and patient pace of the beginning of Notebook Eleven, for instance, slowly circumscribing its concerns and tantalisingly giving glimpses of paths whose taking—Gramsci seems to have assumed—could be comfortably deferred until later in the day, gives way to a rapid and brief inventory-taking towards the end, as if he were racing against the dwindling of the candle to set down all that he had in mind, as reminders for the recommencement of work on the morrow.

3.3.2.3. *Third phase*

However, it slowly becomes clear to him in the *third* phase of the *Prison Notebooks* that no such recommencement will be possible. This phase of work lasts from around the middle of 1933 until approximately the same time of year in 1935, when Gramsci's deteriorating health no longer permits the active work of writing. In addition to continuing work on the 3 miscellaneous notebooks begun in the second phase, Gramsci works on an additional 13 special notebooks, some only a few pages in length. He rewrites texts largely deriving from the first phase of work, with some slight (though sometimes very conceptually significant) modifications of formulation. Much more so than in the special notebooks 10–13, when previous notes had been significantly reworked and conceptually clarified within the economy of a related but substantially new project, these special notebooks are almost entirely composed of transcriptions of the first drafts, more a serial regroupment in thematic areas than thorough-going revision of the original texts. Nevertheless, Gramsci at times still seems to seek to rally his failing energies for one last assault on new (or only partially scouted) territory, as evidenced by the themes of Notebook Twenty-Two ('Americanism and Fordism'—1934), Notebook Twenty-Eight ('Lorianism'—1935) and, perhaps most spectacularly of all, Notebook Twenty-Nine ('Notes for an Introduction to the Study of Grammar'—1935).

Conditional liberty was granted to Gramsci in October of 1934, followed by transfer to the clinic 'Quisisana' in Rome in August of 1935. These were seemingly ideal conditions for returning to his original plan enriched with the mass of material won in the most unpropitious circumstances. But the

brutality of prison life and Gramsci's own chronically bad health had already wreaked their havoc.

His mind remains clear, but his energies abandon him bit by bit. The organism, exhausted, slowly shuts down. The work of the *Prison Notebooks* is finished and it will no longer be able to be completed.⁷⁸

3.4. Incompletion: a work in progress

We can thus see, as Frosini has argued, the *Prison Notebooks* are '*a work not carried to completion in any of its segments*'.⁷⁹ They are a non-work, or rather, a series of non-works, incomplete in their articulated totality and each incomplete in its individual elaboration. There is no original but unwritten systematic text to be reconstructed, for the simple reason that no such single, 'definitive' text was ever even projected. Only by writing history in the 'future anterior', in the negative sense condemned by Althusser⁸⁰—in this case, projecting the organisation of the first, postwar edition of the *Prison Notebooks*, or any other purported thematic organisation, onto Gramsci's manuscripts as their definitive 'truth' rather than as editorial convenience—, could we produce such an 'essence' of Gramsci's carceral thought, with all the easy-going idealist assumptions that such a concept entails. The *Prison Notebooks* derive from no such Platonic Form, only subsequently corrupted by the contingencies of history. Rather, they 'have an internal history, whose reconstruction is an essential and preliminary operation for any attempt at logical and "systematic" recomposition of the order and the structure of the discourse'.⁸¹ Not reconstruction of an *Urtext* of the *Prison Notebooks*, therefore, but the reconstruction of the 'internal history' of Gramsci's 'discourse': in fact, viewed from one perspective, they are nothing more than an inventory of that history, the contingently surviving material traces of contingencies produced by overwhelming necessity.⁸²

⁷⁸ Gerratana 1975, p. xxix.

⁷⁹ Frosini 2003, p. 74.

⁸⁰ Althusser 1969, p. 54.

⁸¹ Francioni 1984, p. 152.

⁸² On the highly 'contingent' publication history of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, cf. *FSPN*, p. 508.

3.4.1. Fragmentary philology

At the limit of the reconstructive approach, and in the other direction, one could, after 'mapping' the different phases of Gramsci's work and their inter-relationship, seek to reconstruct a series of essays that would more or less correspond to some of the themes outlined in one of Gramsci's numerous work plans, sometimes incompatible, if not contradictory, in terms of the arrangement of material. The history of Gramscian scholarship is replete with examples of such well-intentioned but ultimately partisan selective procedures. But what criteria could be used to construct such (artificial) texts that could legitimately claim to 're-present' the 'authentic' Gramsci? One might choose to eliminate all those texts (A texts) of which there are later versions (C texts), thus performing conceptually the methodical mechanical cancellation employed by Gramsci after he had transcribed a passage from one notebook to another. While this might seem to yield Gramsci's 'mature' thought, eliminating mere study material, the result would conceal the dialectical tension and emergence that is central to his method. Furthermore, it would risk eliminating formulations that, while seemingly roads not taken, help to specify the significance and reference of later, more 'conceptually developed' passages.

In another direction, one might valorise Gramsci's second phase of work, the special notebooks interrupted by external rather than internal determinants, according to a certain 'fidelity' to the spirit of Gramsci's project if not the word. This strategy, however, would neglect the fact that although the third phase of his work involves a relative lack of new materials, Gramsci still makes decisive theoretical advances, in relation both to particular concepts and questions and to their articulation, which, in turn, throw light on his earlier research (this is particularly the case, for example, in terms of Gramsci's deepening of the political articulation between his notion of historicism and his critique of speculation). Similar objections can be raised regarding the unavoidable myopia of any particular reconstructive strategy, whatever its merits otherwise. As Buttigieg notes, 'only by doing violence to the text of the *Prison Notebooks* could one conceal their fragmentariness and reconstruct them into a conventional, more or less unified format'.⁸³ More productive than such a search for origins or *telos* would simply be to admit the obvious:

⁸³ Buttigieg 1992, p. x.

history happened the way it did, and our task now is not to try 'to resuscitate Carthage', but rather, like Benjamin, to grasp the 'historical image', or the *Konstellation* that was condensed and intensified in Gramsci's prison labours.⁸⁴

Even a type of limited reconstructive strategy, however, would be defeated by the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the *Prison Notebooks* (Anderson's fourth assumption). This is a feature that subsists not merely at the level of the three unfinished phases of work or even at the level of interruptions to series of thematic notes within each phase, but is internal to many of the individual notes themselves. Many of these, it is true, are directly attributable to lack of necessary bibliographical resources in prison and what Gramsci himself called his perhaps excessive 'methodological scruples'.⁸⁵ Thus, on numerous occasions, Gramsci pursues a theme, only to declare that a particular text must be consulted, empirical studies would be necessary to validate his thesis and so forth. At the beginning of Notebook Eleven, like the warning above the gates to the City of Dis, stands the following admonishment to the unknown overzealous disciple.

The notes contained in this notebook, as in the others, have been dashed off, almost without pausing for the ink to dry, as a rapid *aide-mémoire*. They are all to be revised since they certainly contain inexact formulations, false juxtapositions, anachronisms. Written without having at hand the books that are mentioned it is possible that, on checking, they might have to be corrected radically because just the opposite of what is written turns out to be true.⁸⁶

As Buttigieg notes,

paradoxically, what prevented Gramsci from completing his 'study', what held him back from giving a definitive final shape to his research and theoretical projects, what made him defer the possibility of gathering his materials into a book or a series of monographs, what restrained him from

⁸⁴ Benjamin quotes Flaubert in a footnote to Thesis VII of his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage' (Benjamin 1969, p. 256).

⁸⁵ In a letter to Tania: 'You must remember that the habit of rigorous philological discipline acquired during my years at the university has imbued me, perhaps excessively, with methodological scruples' (Gramsci 1993, 2, p. 52).

⁸⁶ Q 11; cf. Q 4, § 16; *FSPN*, p. lxxxii.

bringing his open-ended exploration to a conclusive closure was his unswerving adherence to the demands of intellectual discipline, critical rigor, and scholarly thoroughness.⁸⁷

This dimension of 'the fragmentary character of the notebooks', therefore, does not derive from a tendency towards theoretical abstraction or a speculative *Kehre* during Gramsci's incarceration. On the contrary, it is due, 'at least in part, to the "philological" method governing their composition'.⁸⁸

At other times, one senses that incompleteness stems from the fact that Gramsci's energies were fading. Having begun the composition of a text with confidence, he realised that its completion lay beyond the power available to him at the time, subjected to the temporal and spiritual disturbances of the carceral régime. As if he were struggling against the treachery of his own exhaustion, he thus rapidly jotted down references to related notes and themes, signposts for future work, entire lines of argument and development deposited for safe keeping in single words or concepts. The closing stages of the second phase of Gramsci's project, and the third phase (when it is not simply the re-transcription with some terminological refinement of notes from prior phases), are strongly marked by incompleteness of this type. The final series of notes in Notebook Eleven ('VI. Miscellaneous notes') provides perhaps the most telling illustration of such a race against the soon-to-be-spent candle, all the more notable for the relatively systematic exposition that precedes it.

Notebook Eleven begins with an expansive optimism. It is clear that Gramsci had thought long and hard about how he could integrate previous researches into the architecture of this, possibly the most organic of all the notebooks. If he had not foreseen all of the twists and turns that would emerge during the act of writing, he had at least fixed a firm image of its overall shape and texture during its peripatetic composition.⁸⁹ The central philosophical sections of Notebook Eleven ('Notes for an introduction to and an initiation in the study of philosophy and the history of culture') begin not with a critique of other positions (as in the previous series of notes on philosophy), but with

⁸⁷ Buttigieg 1992, pp. 6–7.

⁸⁸ Buttigieg 1992, p. 63.

⁸⁹ It was customary for Gramsci to compose his text during his prison yard walks and then to transcribe them neatly onto the page of his notebook, with remarkably few corrections or later changes. On this, and other personal images of Gramsci, cf. Baratta 2003.

the presentation of orientation points for Gramsci's own positive alternative: 'Some Preliminary Points of Reference'. A whole series of previously essayed themes ('all people are intellectuals/philosophers'; philosophy as *Weltanschauung*; historicity of the formation of the individual; hegemonic determination of language; connection between *senso comune*, religion and philosophy; the philosophy of praxis as *coupure* with the prior philosophical tradition; regression to fatalism within the new *Weltanschauung* etc) are integrated into the single note (§12) that constitutes this section. Positive elaboration is then immediately complemented by negative critique in the second section, 'Critical Observations and Notes on an Attempt at a "Popular Essay of Sociology"', revisiting previous objections to Bukharin in systematic terms. This is then followed by three sections combining both constructive and deconstructive impulses: 'III. Science and "Scientific" Ideologies'; 'IV. The Logical Instruments of Thought'; 'V. Translatability of Scientific and Philosophical Languages'. By the time of the sixth section however, Gramsci's systematising impulses have been exhausted; the very title of the section, 'Miscellaneous Notes', indicates a return to the bowerbird procedure of earlier notebooks. The distinctive conceptual focus that characterises Notebook Eleven remains intact; the attempt at a formal presentation befitting it is abandoned. Even this, then, the most organic of Gramsci's notebooks and seemingly the one that relatively slight editorial intervention could most easily prepare for publication as a 'work' (albeit one of a peculiar nature, though no more so than other works acknowledged as Marxist classics, such as Adorno's *Minima Moralia* or Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts*) remains incomplete.⁹⁰

3.4.2. An anti-philosophical novel

Other dimensions of incompleteness, however, seem to derive from no such 'external' discomfort. Rather, something much more profound seems to have been troubling Gramsci, as if he knew before he began certain notes that they would end with what some, undoubtedly, would regard not as a bang but a whimper—and not merely because he did not have access to the necessary

⁹⁰ Arguably, a critical reconstruction of the project whose centre is Notebook Eleven would also need to include those notes in Notebooks Ten and Fifteen written in the same period, whose different location was determined above all by limitations of space rather than substantive or conceptual considerations. Cf. Francioni 1984.

books. For example, 'Speculative Philosophy',⁹¹ written in the second half of 1932, begins with the following observation:

It would be wrong to conceal the difficulties presented by the discussion and criticism of the 'speculative' character of certain philosophical systems and by the theoretical 'negation' of the 'speculative form' of philosophical conceptions.

Gramsci then proceeds to pose some exploratory questions:

1. Is the 'speculative' element proper to every philosophy and is it the form itself which every theoretical construction as such must assume? That is to say, is 'speculation' synonymous with philosophy and with theory?
2. Or is the question to be put an 'historical' one? Is the problem only an historical, and not a theoretical one, in the sense that every conception of the world, at a specific phase of its history, assumes a 'speculative' form that represents its apogee and the beginning of its dissolution?⁹²

He continues to explore this 'historicist' line of research, drawing an analogy with different phases in the development of the state and the hegemonic project of a social class. The historicist analysis of speculation leads directly into a critique of the political processes by which it emerges, as an ideal complement (and sometimes a counterweight) to the *conatus* of a particular hegemonic apparatus. Yet Gramsci also notes that 'critique itself', insofar as it is also a social force contesting for hegemony, 'will have its speculative phase, which marks its apogee. The question is this', he notes in conclusion:

whether this apogee cannot be the beginning of an historical phase of a new type in which necessity and freedom have organically interpenetrated and there will be no more social contradictions, so that the only dialectic will be that of the idea, a dialectic of concepts and no longer of historical forces.⁹³

⁹¹ Q 11, §53; *SPN*, p. 370.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

The question necessarily remains, of course, a question (even if it can here be read as tending towards the rhetorical).⁹⁴ How could it be otherwise? Only with the beginning of this 'historical phase of a new type' would it be possible to verify if there would no longer be 'social contradictions', only an 'ideal' dialectic 'of concepts and no longer of historical forces'. Until that day, as Gramsci knew only too well, the concluding moment of his historicist-political analysis of speculative philosophy must perforce remain only a hypothesis, a guiding orientation for future research, and not a completed or definitive thesis.

Here, it is a case of theoretical incompleteness corresponding to 'incomplete' dimensions of reality itself. Gramsci was well aware of the impossibility of thinking certain problems fully—that is, in their articulation and determination, and from the perspective of overcoming them—before the historical process had presented them in concrete forms. The attempt to surpass them in thought, providing a resolution in thought to contradictions that nevertheless remained operative in reality, could only lead to what Gramsci memorably described as a speculative 'philosophical novel [*romanzo*]'.⁹⁵ Yet Gramsci was not content to formulate the problem in epistemological terms, as the inevitable 'lateness' of thought in relation to a reality it seeks to comprehend and from which it is derivative. Rather, he sought to grasp the mutual implication of thought and reality, whereby the former is comprehended as a constitutive element of the latter. Referring to what can be described as Luxemburg's 'strategic patience', Gramsci noted the ultimately political determinations that were at work here.

Here again the thought expressed by Luxemburg remains useful and suggestive when she writes about the impossibility of treating certain questions of the philosophy of praxis in so far as they have not yet become *actual* for

⁹⁴ The rhetorical nature of this question may have been overdetermined by reference to debates in the USSR. Cf. Frosini 2003 pp. 103–22.

⁹⁵ Q 8, §217; SPN, p. 404; Q 11, §17; SPN, p. 444. 'At the present time the philosopher (of praxis) can only make this generic affirmation and can go no further, he cannot escape from the present field of contradictions, he cannot affirm, other than generically, a world without contradictions, without immediately creating a utopia' (Q 11, §62; SPN, p. 405). Cf. also 'what from the past will be preserved in the dialectical process cannot be determined a priori, but will result from the process itself. It will have the character of historical necessity and not of arbitrary selection on the part of so-called scientists and philosophers' (Q 10II, §41xiv; FSPN, p. 374).

the course of history in general or that of a given social grouping. To the economico-corporate phase, to the phase of struggle for hegemony in civil society and to the phase of State power there correspond specific intellectual activities which cannot be arbitrarily improvised or anticipated.⁹⁶

Rather than being ‘merely’ an epistemological problem (conceived in terms of a lack or surplus of correspondence between thought and reality), therefore, Gramsci formulates the problem as what I have previously referred to as a ‘politico-gnoseological’ thesis. Knowledge arises within determinate political constellations, as both a function of, and as a form within, such constellations; the more ‘historical’ and ‘concrete’ such knowledge is, the more powerfully it is able to contribute to their transformation, rather than their speculative ratification. For Gramsci, it is not enough to know; one must also be able to do, in order to know more adequately. Or, in Spinoza’s terms, the more we are able to do, the more we are able to know (with the obvious corollary that the less we are able to do, the less we are able to know).⁹⁷

The notes characterised by this type of incompleteness thus internalise the ‘historically’ incomplete situations they attempt to document and to analyse. They are *necessarily and constitutively incomplete*, in a strong sense. Is *this* form of fragmentary incompleteness of the *Prison Notebooks* ‘simply because’, as Kate Crehan has recently asked, ‘of the constraints of writing them while incarcerated in a Fascist jail’? Are the *Prison Notebooks* really little more than a rubble of fragments that Gramsci shored up against his ruin, or were there ‘deeper reasons to do with the very nature of his intellectual project?’⁹⁸

3.5. An unfinished dialogue

Crehan’s rhetorical question helps us to pose the problem in another register. This perspective argues that Gramsci did indeed produce something of an enduring value beyond his own time—*für ewig*, in a certain sense—but something quite different from either that which he himself had projected or which

⁹⁶ Q 11, §65; *SPN*, pp. 403–4.

⁹⁷ ‘In proportion as any given body is more fitted than others for doing many actions or receiving many impressions at once, so also is the mind, of which it is the object, more fitted than others for forming many simultaneous perceptions’ (EIIIP13S).

⁹⁸ Crehan 2002, p. 13.

the majority of even his most patient readers have expected. Appropriately enough, Gerratana was one of the first to explore this perspective. 'Nobody can think', Gerratana notes, 'that Gramsci left the *Prison Notebooks* in that form because he wanted it that way; that is, that the incompleteness is the result of a free choice'.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, he continues to ask whether 'beyond contingent motives related to the grindstone of prison, there was something in the *forma mentis* of Gramsci, something in particular in the interior structure of his carceral discourse, which necessarily led him, and this time in a strong sense, to *incompleteness*? We have to say yes', Gerratana argues, 'if we think of the *dialogical* nature of his philosophical mentality'.¹⁰⁰

3.5.1. The education of the educator

Gerratana draws attention to the essentially dialogical dimension of Gramsci's earlier journalism and work of political leadership. As an interlocutor of contemporary events and political and social movements, Gramsci was necessarily placed 'in a constant relationship of reciprocity of master-student' with the social environment he sought to influence and from which he needed to learn.¹⁰¹ These occupations, formative for Gramsci, were dialogues in the fullest sense of the word, necessarily partial and incomplete in the discourses and acts of one participant, only taking on their fullest dimensions in relations of on-going exchange, critique and self-critique, reformulation and redeployment. The journalist and politician intervened transformatively in the surrounding social and political environment, but equally, he was transformed 'by the reactions of the external cultural environment',¹⁰² giving these dialogues a particularly definitive form: 'thus the dialogue, realised in the act, was deposited directly in life and in history'.¹⁰³ Paradoxically, however, the 'completeness' of Gramsci's journalistic and political dialogues led them to lose historical potency, mere 'testimony of an exhausted dialogue'. On the other

⁹⁹ Gerratana 1997, p. xii.

¹⁰⁰ Gerratana 1997, p. xiii. As Gramsci himself once remarked, 'I generally find it necessary to take up a dialectical or dialogic standpoint, otherwise I don't feel any intellectual stimulation. As I once told you, I don't like to throw stones into the dark; I like to be faced with a concrete partner or opponent' (Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 369).

¹⁰¹ Gerratana 1997, p. xvi.

¹⁰² Gerratana 1997, pp. xvi–ii.

¹⁰³ Gerratana 1997, p. xvii.

hand, the 'conceptual instruments' only partially 'forged in the workshop of the *Prison Notebooks*' remained open to ulterior developments in 'a delayed dialogue with other generations'.¹⁰⁴ Gerratana thus argues that

the fragmentariness and incompleteness of the *Prison Notebooks*, even if not intended, have in the end helped to make Gramsci a classic author, open to different interpretations because in each period the reader can establish a new dialogue with him.¹⁰⁵

Prior to discussing the *Sturm und Drang* years in Turin, however, Gerratana had argued that there are even more fundamental 'dialogical' reasons for regarding the incompletion of the *Prison Notebooks* project as, at least in part, necessary—and this time in the sense of constitutive—rather than contingent and compromising. Astoundingly, he finds evidence for this in the paedagogical and dialectical dimensions of Gramsci's theory of hegemony itself and, in particular, in the figure of the 'democratic philosopher', understood as a concrete embodiment of the general political perspective. Gramsci had argued that this 'new type of philosopher' is distinguished by the conviction that an individual's personality is not confined to an individual organism but is rather 'an active social relation of modification of the cultural environment', involving 'the reciprocal influence between master and student'.¹⁰⁶ For Gerratana, the

democratic philosopher is therefore that philosopher who wants to modify 'the cultural environment' of which he is a part, but accepts at the same time to be modified by this environment, which 'functions as a master' because it compels him to a continual self-criticism.¹⁰⁷

The democratic philosopher, just as the practice of hegemony, 'in order to be valid [...] must remain open, like the active relation of science and life, never concluded in the completed perfection of a process that no longer needs to be renewed'.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Gerratana 1997, p. xviii.

¹⁰⁶ Q 1011, §44; *SPN*, p. 350.

¹⁰⁷ Gerratana 1997, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

3.5.2. Necessary incompleteness

Such, it seems to Gerratana, was always the nature of Gramsci's intellectual practice; but this need for 'dialectical dialogue', frustrated by isolation in prison, produced not only an 'external' incompleteness (dialogues that remained monologues, awaiting their completion in an adequate reception),¹⁰⁹ but also a 'deliberate' incompleteness *internal* to the very conceptual and discursive structure of the *Prison Notebooks*, which corresponds in important respects to Gramsci's distinctive theory of proletarian hegemony. In a certain sense, Gramsci's aim of critique, correction and modification of central theses in the dialectical exchange of dialogue, had as a necessary corollary the incompleteness of these theses in their monological form. They could only be 'completed'—or more exactly, further elaborated—by their 'translation' into practice, in its turn 'retranslated' back into a theoretical register, in 'a constant relationship of reciprocity of master-student'. This form of incompleteness, in other words, was not accidental or damaging to Gramsci's original plan, but, on the contrary, necessary and enabling, the highest realisation of a project that aimed at valorising the 'creative popular spirit', or the democratic potentials of the organised working-class movement and its struggle for political hegemony. Presently consigned to a subaltern position, it required a 'dialectical dialogue' in order to assume its historical tasks.

Given these conditions, rather than searching for the true obliterated text of Gramsci's thought, it is more productive to acknowledge from the outset that Gramsci's carceral project *was not finished because it could not be finished*. It aimed not at 'the completed perfection of a process that no longer needs to be renovated'. Rather, the *Prison Notebooks* sought to embody that principle which Gramsci calls 'living philology': 'the "experience" of historical materialism is history itself, the study of particular facts, "philology". [...] "Philology" is the methodological expression of the importance of particular facts understood as definite and precise "individualities"'.¹¹⁰ As Buttigieg argues,

¹⁰⁹ 'The *incompleteness* of the text of the *Prison Notebooks*' thus 'became functional to the future encounter with the absent interlocutor, who, according to the logic of the "democratic philosopher", would not only have to hear Gramsci's word, but, hearing it, would also be able to complete it and to modify it' (Gerratana 1997, p. xv).

¹¹⁰ Q 7, §6; SPN, p. 428.

In order to stabilize the relationships among the fragments that make up the *Prison Notebooks* one would have to abandon 'philology' [...]. One would have to place each piece in a necessary and fixed relation to other pieces in such a way as to produce a total structure which one could contemplate in its wholeness. But history is presented in the notebooks as 'experience' not as contemplation; and the 'experience upon which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematized'.¹¹¹

The appropriate metaphor to grasp the dynamic of this research project is less the confident conclusion of the *Republic* than the *aporiai* that conclude the early Platonic dialogues; less the fixed types of the allegorical medieval morality play than the determined transformation of character of Shakespearean tragedy; less the 'systematic treatment' or 'scholastic treatise' Gramsci saw as one of the forms in which political theory had appeared before Machiavelli, than the 'living book in which political ideology and science are found in the dramatic form of a myth' of *The Prince*, or the dramatic development of concepts which 'results from the discourse' itself, which he proposed as the appropriate form for a modern rewriting of Machiavelli's text, rather than 'a cold and pedantic exposition of ratiocinations'.¹¹²

3.6. An Ariadne's thread

Our task as readers of the *Prison Notebooks* today, therefore, is less one of reconstruction than of a particular type of intervention, simultaneously on two fronts: on the one hand, we must determine with as much accuracy as philology allows, the conceptual coordinates of Gramsci's trajectory, establishing what Gramsci really thought and wrote in the actual texts he composed in prison; and, on the other hand, we must attempt to explore the lines of research that he initiated but could not conclude. Complementary, these are, in fact, two distinct modes of reading and interpretation that should not be conflated. Concretely, they call for the establishment of several protocols for a productive engagement with the *Prison Notebooks* that neither neglects their specificity nor 'solicits' the text into saying more than it does.

¹¹¹ Buttigieg 1992, pp. 63–4.

¹¹² Q 13, § 1; *SPN*, p. 125.

3.6.1. Preliminary philology

First, both the unpublished, unauthorised status of the text and the dialogical nature of Gramsci's thought require 'some preliminary detailed philological work', as Gramsci himself said in relation to Marx's work in a note from the early phases of his research. It is a famous passage that has often been invoked by scholars of Marx as among the most rational and scientifically rigorous approaches to the mass of manuscripts that constitute the Marxian legacy.¹¹³ The historical-critical method it proposes, and its sensitivity to and sympathy for the particular challenges presented by a 'polemically critical' type of temperament, are, if anything, even more appropriate for the thought and text of Gramsci himself. Such is its pertinence to the present investigation that it deserves to be quoted in full.

If one wishes to study the birth of a conception of the world which has never been systematically expounded by its founder (and one furthermore whose essential coherence is to be sought not in each individual writing or series of writings but in the whole development of the multiform intellectual work in which the elements of the conception are implicit) some preliminary detailed philological work has to be done. This has to be carried out with the most scrupulous accuracy, scientific honesty and intellectual loyalty and without any preconceptions, apriorism or *parti pris*. It is necessary, first of all, to reconstruct the process of intellectual development of the thinker in question in order to identify those elements which were to become stable and 'permanent'—in other words those which were taken up as the thinker's own thought, distinct from and superior to the 'material' which he had studied earlier and which served as a stimulus to him. It is only the former elements which are essential aspects of the process of development. This selection can be made for periods of varying length, determined by intrinsic factors and not by external evidence (though that too can be utilised) and it results in a series of 'discards', that is to say of partial doctrines and theories for which

¹¹³ Though this passage is often used to refer to the works of Marx and Engels—Gramsci's immediate reference—the criteria it proposes are in fact very similar to those outlined at beginning of Q 1011, 'Some general methodological criteria for the critique of the philosophy of Croce'. Gramsci's proposal represents an exordium for any historical-critical editorial work.

the thinker may have had a certain sympathy, at certain times, even to the extent of having accepted them provisionally and of having availed himself of them for his work of criticism and of historical and scientific creation.

It is a matter of common observation among all scholars, from personal experience, that any new theory studied with 'heroic fury' (that is, studied not out of mere external curiosity but for reasons of deep interest) for a certain period, especially if one is young, attracts the student of its own accord and takes possession of his whole personality, only to be limited by the study of the next theory, until such a time as a critical equilibrium is created and one learns to study deeply but without succumbing to the fascination of the system and the author under study. These observations are all the more valid the more the thinker in question is endowed with a violent impetus, has a polemical character and is lacking in *esprit de système*, or when one is dealing with a personality in whom theoretical and practical activity are indissolubly intertwined and with an intellect in a process of continual creation and perpetual movement, with a strong and mercilessly vigorous sense of self-criticism. Given these premises, the work should be conducted on the following lines: 1. Reconstruction of the author's biography, not only as regards his practical activity, but also and above all as regards his intellectual activity. 2. A catalogue of all his works, even those most easily overlooked, in chronological order, divided according to intrinsic criteria—of intellectual formation, maturity, possession and application of the new way of thinking and of conceiving life and the world. Search for the *Leitmotiv*, for the rhythm of the thought as it develops, should be more important than that for single casual affirmations and isolated aphorisms.¹¹⁴

3.6.2. Differential temporalities

Second, the unpublished status of these texts calls for a precise determination of their different theoretical 'weights', frames of reference and moments of composition. It is necessary to 'read this non-work with attention, to penetrate in its hidden articulations and never to lose sight of its fundamentally *processual* nature'.¹¹⁵ In particular, Gramsci's three different phases of writing

¹¹⁴ Q 16, § 2.

¹¹⁵ Frosini 2003, p. 74.

behoove an analysis of the distinct temporality of each note and series of notes, both individually and taken as a whole. This is to say that not all the notes have the same value, as expressions of what Gramsci 'really thought or wrote'. A roughly sketched note from the early phases can only with violence be read unproblematically alongside a note from an advanced stage of research. Similarly, later notes must be carefully contextualised and their explicit and implicit antecedents carefully noted, lest a result be taken for a point of departure or vice-versa. As Buttigieg has argued, an accurate and rewarding engagement with the *Prison Notebooks* cannot be content to regard the 'fragmentary' nature of Gramsci's project as an obstacle, to be overcome through a rhizomatic transvaluation of all philological values. Rather, it must pay close attention to the rhythm of Gramsci thought, to its various transformations and even to the specificity of the 'fragmentary' dimension of the *Prison Notebooks* itself.

3.6.3. A modern classic

Third, the dialogical nature of Gramsci's thought requires caution from the contemporary reader, lest we confuse the questions posed by Gramsci with our own answers. As we have seen, Gramsci has been taken up and read by successive generations, coming from very different national and political traditions, in very different and sometimes contradictory ways. One way of understanding this perennial and multifaceted appeal—an increasingly dominant approach in recent Gramscian scholarship—is to regard it as an index of Gramsci's status as a 'classic' author of the twentieth century. 'Classic', in this sense, means the almost protean capacity to speak to different contexts and concerns, to be 'contemporary' with different times. Another way, adopting a motto from Wilde, would be to regard it as the rage of Caliban seeing, or not seeing, his own face in the mirror: not a few famous readings of Gramsci ultimately reflect more the predispositions of their authors than an accurate analysis of Gramsci's own text. In effect, they have rewritten the *Prison Notebooks* in terms of prevailing concerns. In this sense, it is not the *Prison Notebooks* that have constituted a maze of mirrors, but rather, the interests of different conjunctures that have thought to find their reflection in Gramsci's texts, only to end up distorting them.

This risk is immanent to Gramsci's method: he does indeed invite his readers to take part in a collaborative exploration, to enter into his laboratory as fellow

researchers, to *dialogue* in the original sense of the word. The importance of his thought for contemporary Marxism consists precisely in this degree of his continuing historical efficacy, that is, the extent to which the problems he sought to analyse remain 'burning questions of our movement' today. Yet such 'actuality' should not be confused with identity. Only a reading that refuses the lures of, on the one hand, interpellation of the present by Gramsci's discourse and, on the other, interpellation of the *Prison Notebooks* by the present, will be adequate both to grasp the distinctiveness of this incomplete project and to continue it. If the *Prison Notebooks* are indeed a 'work in progress', this implies that it is all the more necessary to determine precisely from the outset what Gramsci actually said and what progress he made, in order to take up the legacy of 'unfinished business' that he bequeaths to us. 'To be sufficiently contemporary with out past'¹¹⁶ perhaps, in the first instance, to acknowledge that it is our distance from it that makes dialogue possible and all the more necessary.

¹¹⁶ Anderson 1976a, p. 78.

Chapter Four

Contra the Passive Revolution

The importance of the concept of hegemony in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is so widely acknowledged that no justification is necessary for making it the central element in any study of that work.¹ Indeed, such is its centrality in Gramsci's lexicon that no study of his thought, whether in its totality or considered according to what are only inaccurately regarded as its component parts (sociological surveys, historiographical writings, political theory, literary criticism etc) can avoid confronting its architectonic status. However, there is need for caution before proceeding to assume that it has a foundational priority in terms of the development of Gramsci's project, or that it could function as a 'key' by means of which we could decipher the supposedly coded message. For, although the concept of hegemony is indeed absolutely central to all of Gramsci's research, it is not an origin from which his other concepts proceed, or a bud that later blossomed into the bloom of the *Prison Notebooks*. Neither is it an end towards which his research tend, figuring as the 'truth' that reveals their (epistemological) error, still less a 'quasi-absent centre' around which Gramsci's *aporiai* gravitate, their lack resolved

¹ Cf. the online *Gramsci Bibliography* (Cammatt et al.) for a list of studies dealing with the concept.

by its intermittently appearing plenitude. Its centrality is of another order: it is a moment of *rupture* with the conceptuality of the bourgeois epoch analysed in the *Prison Notebooks*. It points to the possibility of breaking out of this conceptuality's self-referential and contradictory circularity, but it does not itself enact such a liberation; it remains prospective, tentative, exploratory. Rather, it is a '*practico-indicative*' or 'practical' concept,² emerging from within a *Konstellation* of concepts as a *provisional solution* to the problems posed within it. In terms borrowed from *Reading 'Capital'*, hegemony has its own 'temporality' distinct from the temporalities of the other concepts in the *Prison Notebooks*; whereas the latter are *analysed*, the concept of hegemony is *deployed*. It thus cannot be analysed independently, but only after delineating the constellation of concepts to which, in its 'integral' meaning (that is, the meaning that it progressively assumes within the immanent dynamic of Gramsci's thought), it was designed as a response.

We can thus say that, if the concept of hegemony is the 'truth' of Gramsci's thought, it is only so in the sense in which Althusser argued that 'the truth of a philosophy lies entirely in its effects'.³ That is, it does not produce Gramsci's discourse, but is produced by it (and in turn redefines the status of that productive discourse itself). In this sense, hegemony provides us with a key with which to read the other concepts of the *Prison Notebooks* in the same non-teleological way as 'human anatomy', Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, 'contains a key to the anatomy of the ape'. It permits us to understand the analyses of the *Prison Notebooks* from the determinant perspective of the overcoming of the conjuncture they describe and of which they are an integral dimension. Before enquiring into the meaning of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, therefore, we must first ask another question: what is this *Konstellation* of concepts as a response to which Gramsci deploys the concept of hegemony?

² 'Practico-indicative' in the sense in which 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' characterised the concept of 'civil society' (Anderson 1976a, p. 35), as designating a *dispositif* of problems requiring further research; 'practical' in the sense in which Althusser defined 'the equivalent of a signal, of a noticeboard that "points out" what movement is to be put into effect and in what direction, to what place, must there be displacement to reach the real earth rather than the heaven of abstraction' (Althusser 1969, p. 243).

³ Althusser 1997, p. 4.

Anderson's excavation of the prehistory of the concept of hegemony and related terms in the debates of Russian and German Social Democracy would seem to provide us with just such a map of Gramsci's cognitive universe. By focusing upon a few select passages on the central political experience of Gramsci's generation—the struggle to 'catch up' with the success of the Russian Revolution in the 'advanced' capitalist West—Anderson was able to provide a symptomatic reading of the evolution in the *Prison Notebooks* of the theoretical preconditions of the concept of hegemony, the characterisation of the nature of the capitalist state and its relation to civil society. Furthermore, setting this development in its true historical context, as a moment within the debates of revolutionary Marxism preceding and following the Russian Revolution, allowed him to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of Gramsci's particular response to a problem that had occupied the theoretical and practical energies of the entire classical Marxist tradition.

Nevertheless, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' fell short of its goal of fixing 'with greater precision what Gramsci said and meant in his captivity' and of reconstructing 'the true theoretical context of his work'.⁴ Partially, this was due, as we have seen, to the limitations of Gramscian philology at the time; partially, it was because of an under-evaluation of the problems posed by the distinctive literary form of the incomplete *Prison Notebooks* project. In terms of the concept of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks*, Anderson's analysis amalgamated too quickly its distinct political and conceptual antecedents; that is, it conflated the *historical* factors that inspired Gramsci's research project with the *conceptual* motivations of his new concept of hegemony, as it functions in Gramsci's carceral discourse. Intimately related, they are nevertheless not the same. Gramsci's *historical* point of departure, like that of many of his contemporaries in the early 1920s, was the attempt to find an adequate 'translation' into the Western vernaculars of the perspectives that had guided the proletariat to victory in Russia. The *theoretical* point of departure of the *Prison Notebooks*, however, considered as a distinctive conceptual structure, is something quite different. Like any theoretical research project, the *Prison Notebooks* have their own relative autonomy and differential temporality. In the terms of *Reading 'Capital'*,

⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 7.

the thought categories which 'reproduce' the real categories do *not* occupy the *same* place as they do in the order of real historical genesis, but quite different places assigned them by their function in the production process of the object of knowledge.⁵

Gramsci's dialectical workshop did not aim simply to reproduce a given historical narrative in conceptual form; rather, it sought an 'anti-philosopher's stone' that would help to transform it. Historically given experiences and categories were transmuted in this alchemical process into a synchronic image of the present viewed from a determinate perspective, in order to be able all the better to shatter it.

Needless to say, neither this conceptual structure nor its point of departure was present from the outset of Gramsci's researches, in either a conscious or unconscious form. Gramsci was not trying to remember that which he already knew; the *Prison Notebooks* were not a research project that knew where it was going. Rather, it was subject to the consolidation of originally marginal or occasional insights into more developed research questions, the elaboration of detours into main thoroughfares. The conceptual structure of this project emerges gradually, as a field of dialectical tensions whose repeated testing and probing comes to define a problematic or *dispositif* within which Gramsci's concrete research subjects are articulated and their interrelation progressively clarified. They remained open lines of research, right up until the moment of their (contingently determined, temporally necessary) incompleteness. It is nevertheless possible to delineate a guiding thread or general perspective that organised Gramsci's researches in a heuristic sense. Viewed from the perspective of the contemporary reader who would grasp the fundamental coherence of these disparate fragments, following this guiding thread leads towards the theoretical point of departure of the conceptual structure of the *Prison Notebooks* as we have received them, or what is the same thing, 'the fundamental *unity of inspiration*' of Gramsci's carceral research.⁶

This guiding thread that organises all of Gramsci's carceral research can be succinctly characterised as *the search for an adequate theory of proletarian hegemony in the epoch of the 'organic crisis' or the 'passive revolution' of the bourgeois 'integral State'*. All of the terms in this formulation are central categories of

⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 41.

⁶ Francioni 1984, p. 150.

Gramsci's political theory; it will therefore be necessary to elucidate each of them in turn, in reverse order, in order to understand the particular theoretical and historiographical presuppositions which informed Gramsci's elaboration of the Bolshevik thesis of *gegemoniya* into the qualitatively new theory of *egemonia*.

4.1. The 'integral State'

As critics from Anderson to Lo Piparo to Ives have noted, Gramsci has often been credited, erroneously, with the coinage of the concept of 'hegemony'. Much more rarely, however, has that concept been noted which has a more legitimate claim to be Gramsci's novel contribution to Marxist political theory: the concept of the 'integral State'. With this concept, Gramsci attempted to analyse the mutual interpenetration and reinforcement of 'political society' and 'civil society' (to be distinguished from each other methodologically, not organically) within a unified (and indivisible) state-form. According to this concept, the state (in its integral form) was not to be limited to the machinery of government and legal institutions (the 'state' understood in a limited sense). Rather, the concept of the integral state was intended as a dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society. Civil society is the terrain upon which social classes compete for social and political leadership or hegemony over other social classes.⁷ Such hegemony is guaranteed, however, 'in the last instance', by capture of the legal monopoly of violence embodied in the institutions of political society.⁸ Understood in this integral sense, Gramsci argued in March 1933,

⁷ As we will see in Chapter Nine, the intellectuals of opposed social classes play a decisive role (varying according to the particular nature of that class's hegemony) of leadership, articulation of interests and coordination of initiatives in the integral State, in the institutions of civil society where hegemony is contested just as much as in those of political society where it is consolidated and guaranteed. For the most comprehensive discussion of the concept of the 'integral State' and the central role of the intellectuals within it, see Buci-Glucksmann 1980, particularly pp. 19–118. Cf. also Rottger 2004.

⁸ It is necessary to stress this element, against interpretative traditions, from Italian proponents of an 'historical compromise' to Eurocommunists to contemporary advocates of a nebulously defined radical democracy, which have attempted to confine Gramsci's theory of hegemony to a war of position in the trenches of civil society. It is only within the problematic of the integral state as a dialectical unity of both civil society

the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules.⁹

Or, in a formulation particularly important for 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', dating from March–August 1931,

the general notion of the State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that the State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony armoured with coercion).¹⁰

Viewed in this way, as a formulaic theoretical proposition, Gramsci's concept of the integral state would appear to violate the organic division established in modern political theory between that sphere of direction and decision (the state) and that which is directed and decided (civil society). The assertion that 'in actual reality civil society and State are one and the same' would then be little more than a 'politician's' impatience with an analytical distinction necessary for accurately measuring the differential institutional forms and strengths of the capitalist state and the society over which it rules.¹¹ As a concept, it would return Marxist state theory to a totalitarian and organic conception of the state 'as everything that exists', such as is commonly attributed to Hegel. Marx and Engels, of course, famously and definitively broke with such an idealist *Staatsauffassung*, even if later they appeared to succumb, on occasion, to the temptation to flirt with a reformulated version of it.¹² Indeed,

and political society that Gramsci's theory of proletarian hegemony becomes comprehensible, as a theory of the political constitution of an alliance of subaltern classes capable of exercising leadership over other subaltern social groups and repression against its class antagonist. It must necessarily progress to the dismantling of the state machinery upon which its antagonist's power is founded, and which provides the ultimate (coercive) guarantee for the bourgeoisie's (consensual) hegemony. Guido Liguori has recently eloquently emphasised that the state-building project of a class 'is an unavoidable moment in the struggle for hegemony' (Liguori 2004b, p. 224).

⁹ Q 15, § 10; *SPN*, p. 244.

¹⁰ Q 6, § 88; *SPN*, p. 263.

¹¹ Q 13, § 18; cf. Q 4, § 38; *SPN*, p. 160.

¹² Marx's famous description of the omnipotence of the state in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* (quoted by Anderson in 'Antinomies'), for example, seems to provide a 'suspicious' reformulation of Hegel's beneficent demiurge: 'The State enmeshes, controls, regulates, supervises and regiments civil society from the most all-embracing expressions of its life down to its most insignificant motions, from its most general modes of exis-

this was Anderson's primary objection to Gramsci's notion of the 'integral State' (even though he did not explicitly refer to it as such): that it was an unsatisfactory and peremptory resolution of the constitutive tension that had defined the modern and particularly Marxist tradition of state theory, sending Marxism back to its idealist antecedents or succumbing to ultra-leftist distortions.

Anderson's critical analysis focused upon those passages concerning the relations between East and West and in particular, the differences between the state-forms in those zones, as the essential terms of Gramsci's theoretical universe. The initial stimulus for such an 'expanded' definition of the state, in Gramsci's personal intellectual biography, may well have been his acute awareness of the different balance of forces in Russia and Western Europe. It would be surprising if it were not, given the previously noted dominance and burning practical immediacy of this theme in the international Communist movement of the early 1920s. Buci-Glucksmann also argues that Gramsci's 'expansion of the state concept is [...] based on the historical experience of the 1920s'.¹³ However, the term 'expanded State' is not to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*. It was proposed by Buci-Glucksmann as an interpretation of Gramsci's notion of the 'integral State', and has since won wide assent from a variety of critics.¹⁴ In my view, however, it is an imprecise formulation that risks introducing conceptual, historical and ultimately *political* misunderstandings of Gramsci's concept. *Conceptually*: the suggestion that Gramsci 'expands' prior concepts of the state is historically inaccurate; Gramsci does not so much 'expand' the concept of the state, as rebel against its instrumental limitation by neo-Kantianism and return to its originally 'expansive' formulation in Hegel and Marx.¹⁵ The notion of an 'expansion of the state' presupposes a 'subjectivist' *Staatsauffassung*, underwritten by an idealist and teleological historicism, according to which the state has progressively 'consumed' society (dogmatically asserted to have once been 'outside' it, in 'Robinsonade' fashion),

tence down to the private life of individuals' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 11, p. 185). As we shall see, this passage was important for Gramsci's state theory.

¹³ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 97.

¹⁴ Cf., e.g., Liguori 2006; Jessop 2007.

¹⁵ Cf. Section 5.2 of the present study; on the theme of the disenchantment of state theory, particularly in Germany, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cf. Colliot-Thélène 1992 and 2000.

in a classically stageist logic. *Historically*: Gramsci, like Hegel and Marx, does not argue that the nineteenth century witnesses an expansion of the state (i.e. a geographically delimited form going beyond its original coordinates, 'invading' a pristine civil society), but, rather, an increasingly more sophisticated internal articulation and condensation of social relations within a given state-form. Varying relations of force and different degrees of (dis) equilibrium between 'levels' of the social formation, accompanied by a redefinition of the political itself, does not constitute an extension or expansion of the state, but an internal transformation of its constitutive dimensions. *Politically*: as originally proposed by Buci-Glucksmann, the concept of the 'expanded State', was intended, 'in the last instance', as a theoretical justification for certain Euro-communist political proposals (in particular, the need to 'work' 'within' the 'state', i.e., the state apparatus), on the basis of an analysis of historical transformations and the specificity of the Western social formations; despite its productive deployment in some theoretical analyses,¹⁶ politically the concept tends towards ultra-leftism or reformism (and usually both, in their classical sequential progression). I have therefore preferred throughout this study to use the concept that actually appears in the *Prison Notebooks* and accurately captures the meaning of Gramsci's analysis: that of the 'integral State'.

In the theoretical structure of the *Prison Notebooks*, it was not the abstract opposition of East and West that prompted Gramsci to develop this new concept of the state. Rather, as we shall see, he proposed the concept of the integral state in order to analyse the emergence of the particular forms of the parliamentary states in the West (precisely the focus that Anderson claimed to be lacking), on the basis of a theoretical discovery concerning the capitalist state-form *as such* that had been made, in the first instance, during political events in the East.

As with many of Gramsci's theoretical discoveries, the preconditions for the concept of the integral state were first elaborated on historiographical terrain, and only later developed into a fully fledged concept that sought to renovate political theory *tout court*. This is to say that the integral state is not, in the first instance, a normative proposition, a theoretical abstraction to which reality is expected to adjust. Rather, it is a theoretical intervention into a determinate political conjuncture. The Althusser of the 'crisis

¹⁶ Cf., e.g., Buci-Glucksmann and Therborn (eds.) 1981.

of Marxism' noted one dimension of this aspect of Gramsci's state theory. He argued in 1978 that

what presents itself, in Gramsci, as a 'theory of the state' (or, rather, what has been taken for a theory of the state for precisely identifiable political reasons) seems to me more closely akin to a *political examination of the 'nature', hence of the 'composition' or internal arrangement [dispositif] of the states of the day, undertaken with a view to defining a political strategy for the workers' movement* after all hope that the schema of 1917 would be repeated had faded.¹⁷

We can further specify the nature of the determinate political conjuncture to which Gramsci attempted to respond. It was defined by two coordinates:

1. on the one hand, Benedetto Croce's reinforcement of liberalism with his tale of modernity as the evolution of 'Freedom'.
2. and, on the other, and more importantly, the resurgence of economism in the international Communist movement in the late 1920s, with resulting 'Third-Period' catastrophism.

With the concepts of the 'integral State' and 'passive revolution', Gramsci attempted to outline a research programme that could provide the historiographical resources to justify an abandoned perspective from the early years of the Comintern: the politics of the united front. It will be necessary to follow the terms of Gramsci's historical studies and observe the ways their immanent dynamic transforms them into materials for conceptual elaboration in order to understand the full import of this intervention—in Gramsci's time and our own.

4.2. The long nineteenth century

The concept of the integral state emerges from Gramsci's analysis of the 'long nineteenth century', particularly in continental Europe and particularly with reference to events in its hegemonic nation-state, namely, France. From the

¹⁷ Althusser 2006, p. 141. It is interesting to note that, despite their differences, Althusser's subsequent analysis of Gramsci in this text is heavily overdetermined by, if not

French Revolution to 1848 (and in a different sense, until the defeat of the Paris Commune), Gramsci detected a period of expansion in which the new state of the victorious bourgeoisie (goaded by the ever-present threat of proletarian rebellion) undertook a programme of social and political 'education' and elevation. After the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie 'was able to present itself as an integral "State", with all the intellectual and moral forces necessary and sufficient for organising a complete and perfect society'.¹⁸ Gramsci did not fail to praise the genuinely revolutionary nature of this project, nor to emphasise that such a class project, embodied in such a state, was genuinely unprecedented. It was the Rubicon beyond which lay modernity in the fullest sense. As Alberto Burgio has emphasised, for Gramsci, 'modernity signals the transition from a castal logic to a relation between classes'.¹⁹ In Gramsci's own words,

the revolution that the bourgeois class has brought into the conception of law, and hence into the function of the State, consists especially in the will of conformism (hence ethnicity of the law and of the State). The previous ruling classes were essentially conservative in the sense that they did not tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e. to enlarge their class sphere 'technically' and ideologically: their conception was that of a closed class. The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an 'educator'.²⁰

Gramsci is here repeating the *Communist Manifesto's* praise of the genuinely revolutionary advances of the bourgeoisie in comparison with all previous

derived from, the critiques set out in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', as Althusser himself admitted (p. 140; p. 104).

¹⁸ Q 6, §10; *SPN*, p. 271; written in November–December 1930. In another passage in the same notebook, Gramsci comprehends this project in terms that will be crucial for both his later critique of 'Statolatry' and, more importantly, the elaboration of the concept of the integral state on the basis of these historically given experiences. He describes 'the Jacobin attempt to institute a cult of the "Supreme Being" that appears to be an attempt to create an identity between State and civil society, to unify in a dictatorial way the constitutive elements of the State in the organic, wider sense (State proper + civil society)' (Q 6, §87; *SPN*, p. 170; written in mid-1931).

¹⁹ Burgio 2002, p. 25.

²⁰ Q 8, §2; *SPN*, p. 260; written in January 1932.

dominant classes, though with a significant explicit emphasis: whereas Marx's and Engels's tract has often been read (particularly recently, in an age of 'globalisation') with an eye to its focus upon the bourgeoisie's revolutionising of the mode of production, Gramsci places the accent upon the *Manifesto's* complementary political thesis that these transformations have been accompanied, in a complex relation of dialectical interaction, by an accompanying revolutionising of the nature of the 'political' and its concrete institutional forms.

The first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, was a period in which the bourgeoisie (or at least certain sections of it, particularly in France) was still a revolutionary class, confident in the universal claims of its own project to produce real historical progress and to institutionalise it in a state-form of a qualitatively new type. If it had not yet developed the highly articulated state apparatus penetrating into the innermost depths of civil society ('the massive structures of the modern democracies, both as State organisations and as complexes of associations in civil society' that Gramsci argues in 1932 emerged in the period after 1870),²¹ it had at least established an irrevocable principle of modern life: henceforth, the state could not be a sovereign instance above 'civil society' (itself now redefined in its relation with the state), in many respects appearing in daily life only exceptionally, but must invest itself in all levels of society to an extent previously unimaginable. The state was no longer merely an instrument of coercion, imposing the interests of the dominant class from above. Now, in its integral form, it had become a network of social relations for the production of consent, for the integration of the subaltern classes into the expansive project of historical development of the leading social group.

4.3. The birth of civil society

The development of civil society was the primary means for such integration. It is no accident that the theoretical elaboration of the term in its modern sense, as related to but distinct from the state, dates from this period.²² Far from being opposed to the state, civil society in this usage appears as the state's

²¹ Q 13, §7; cf. Q 8, §52. In another note, Gramsci nominates 1848 as the decisive date for an acceleration of the institutionalisation of the bourgeois ethical-paedagogical programme. Cf. Q 9, §133; written in November 1932.

²² Cf. Section 5.2.2 et sqq.

complement, tending towards and reflecting the rational organisation, system of rights and juridical equality that distinguish the modern state. Civil society's primary role was to act as a mediating instance or moment of 'organic passage' for the subaltern classes towards the state of the ruling classes: a school of modern 'statehood'. As a field of hegemonic relations, civil society gave the non-leading social groups a real and substantial image of this distinctive 'freedom of moderns', to use Domenico Losurdo's suggestive phrase, such as had not occurred in previous 'castal' conceptions of social and political relations.²³ In principle, (bourgeois) freedom and its consummation in the state is open to all, and it is precisely this that constitutes the immense revolution of the 'political' brought about by the bourgeoisie. Hegemony, then, emerges as a new 'consensual' political practice distinct from mere coercion (a dominant means of previous ruling classes) on this new terrain of civil society; but, like civil society, integrally linked to the state, hegemony's full meaning only becomes apparent when it is related to its dialectical distinction of coercion. Hegemony in civil society functions as the social basis of the dominant class's political power in the state apparatus, which in turn reinforces its initiatives in civil society. The integral state, understood in this broader sense, is the process of the condensation and transformation of these class relations into institutional form. As Burgio argues, the emerging state of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century

is no longer so much a question of military power, periodically employed (or threatened) for the end of reconfirming the supremacy of the dominant class, as a question of *capillary and permanent direction of an entire social fabric*, penetrated into its fibres, rendered ever more compact and transformed, in each of its articulations, into an instrument adequate for the production of new forms of wealth.²⁴

As Gramsci stressed on numerous occasions, Hegel was the fundamental theorist of such an 'ethical' state.²⁵

²³ Cf. Losurdo 2004.

²⁴ Burgio 2002, p. 29.

²⁵ Cf. Q 1, §47; Q 6, §24. 'With Hegel one begins to think no longer according to castes or "estates", but according to the "State", the aristocracy of which are precisely the intellectuals. The "patrimonial" conception of the State (which is the way of thinking according to "castes") is immediately the conception that Hegel has to destroy' (Q 8, §187).

4.4. Passive revolution

The Europe-wide revolts of 1848, however, and, to an even greater extent, the Paris Commune, ushered in a qualitatively new phase of historical development, despite the defeat of both. The previous, fragile equilibrium of class forces and their superstructures were thrown into crisis; the progressive expansivity of the bourgeois project encountered its 'organic crisis'. The adjective 'organic' indicates the extent of this crisis: it was not merely conjunctural disequilibrium, of the type that necessarily accompanies capitalist commodity production and periodically interrupts it; nor was it limited to one of the moments of conflict, either intestine to the ruling class or provoked by spontaneous rebellions by recalcitrant subaltern elements, such as had accompanied the bourgeoisie's rise to power (though the disaggregation of the ruling bloc and diffuse revolt of the dominated were its immediate symptoms).²⁶ Rather, the crisis was 'organic' in the sense that it placed the very foundations of bourgeois hegemony in doubt. In traditional Marxist terms, it was the moment when the bourgeoisie's claims to universality, to advance the common good, were revealed to be in the service of particularist interests, namely, the accumulation of capital in the hands of the ruling class. The working classes' revolt, their refusal to be subsumed pacifically into the expansive state of the bourgeoisie, demanding instead political forms adequate to their own emergent class project, indicated the limits inherent in such a contradictory project that sought to elevate and educate, but only on its own terms. The bourgeois Dr. Frankenstein had unwittingly called forth his own nemesis. This is Gramsci's version of the *Communist Manifesto*'s thesis of the bourgeoisie bringing forward its own gravedigger, though once again, Gramsci stresses, alongside the traditionally emphasised economic dimensions, the political determinants of this process. It was a crisis of the entire social formation, both its economic 'content' and its political 'form'. In a certain sense, the logic of historical development of the previous period went into reverse, a traumatic return to a primal scene. Optimistic magnanimity soured into cantankerous parasitism, the balance between coercion and consent tipped back towards a preponderance of the former, or rather, the redefinition of the latter as a 'coercive consent'. Immediately following the previously quoted passage from Q 8, § 2, Gramsci argues that

²⁶ Cf. Q 7, § 80.

this process comes to a halt, and the conception of the State as pure force is returned to, etc. The bourgeois class is 'saturated'; it not only does not expand, it starts to disintegrate; it not only does not assimilate new elements, it loses part of itself (or at least its losses are enormously more numerous than its assimilations).²⁷

Then began an epoch of 'passive revolution'.

Gramsci appropriated the concept of 'passive revolution' from Vincenzo Cuoco in the early months of 1930. The political context of this appropriation is significant, for it is the same period in which he polemicised against the implicit economism of the Comintern's insurrectionist fantasies of those years, particularly as they related to the struggle against Fascism in Italy. In conversations in prison with other party members, Gramsci insisted that it was necessary to be 'more political', that is, to understand the historical foundations of Fascism and to outline a realistic political programme that could rally mass forces against the régime. Gramsci's proposal was for a constituent assembly, in order to provide the Communist Party with the political space necessary to rebuild its forces for an assault on the bourgeois state as such (and not merely its Fascist deformation). The seeming 'pessimism' of this proposal led to his isolation among the other political prisoners, amid acrimonious accusations of renegacy.²⁸ Judging the balance of forces, Gramsci conducted a tactical retreat to his notebooks in order to furnish his position with the political arguments necessary to justify his untimely meditations.

The concept of 'passive revolution' was originally used by Cuoco to describe the Neapolitan revolution of 1799; Gramsci transformed it, in the first instance, in order to provide an analysis of the distinctive features of the Italian *Risorgimento*.²⁹ However, it soon became clear to Gramsci that the concept could have a more general significance and be used to indicate the curiously unpecu-

²⁷ Q 8, §2; SPN, p. 260.

²⁸ For accounts of Gramsci's political isolation in prison, cf. Lisa 1973, Fiori 1973, Quercioli 1977 and Spriano 1979.

²⁹ Q 1, §44. Gramsci originally used the term 'revolution without revolution', adding 'passive revolution' at a later date in the margins. Elsewhere, he employed the term "'royal conquest" and not popular movement' (Q 3, §40). 'The historical fact of the absence of popular initiative in the development of Italian history, and the fact that "progress" would be verified as the reaction of the dominant classes to the sporadic and disorganic rebellion of the popular masses with "restorations" that comprehend some parts of the popular demands, thus "progressive restorations" or "revolutions-restorations" or even "passive revolutions"' (Q 8, §25).

liar *Sonderweg* to modernity taken also by other nation-states lacking in the radical-popular 'Jacobin moment' which had distinguished the experience of the French Revolution.³⁰ In a third moment, he extended the concept to signify the pacifying and incorporating nature assumed by bourgeois hegemony in the epoch of imperialism, particularly in its Western-European heartlands but with determinant effects upon the colonial periphery. 'Passive revolution' thus came to denote the bourgeois hegemonic project for an entire historical period. As Domenico Losurdo has argued,

beginning with the defeat of the workers and popular classes in June 1848 and further with that of 1871, a phase of passive revolution begins, identifiable neither with the counterrevolution nor, even less, with the political and ideological fall of the dominant class. The category of passive revolution is a category used in the *Prison Notebooks* in order to denote the persistent capacity of initiative of the bourgeoisie which succeeds, even in the historical phase in which it has ceased to be a properly revolutionary class, to produce socio-political transformations, sometimes of significance, conserving securely in its own hands power, initiative and hegemony, and leaving the working classes in their condition of subalternity.³¹

If the bourgeois project was able to endure and still, in some senses, to deliver real progress, the previously ascendant class had nevertheless suffered a significant loss of initiative and mobilising capacity. At the same time, it actively sought to deny other classes the opportunity to assume the initiative, producing stagnation and widespread loss of faith in the 'progress' its previous expansiveness had inspired. Modernity was caught in an Arnoldian twilight, 'wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born'.³²

³⁰ 'The concept of passive revolution seems to me to be exact not only for Italy, but also for other countries that modernise the State by means of a series of reforms or national wars, without passing through the political revolution of the radical Jacobin type' (Q 4, §57).

³¹ Losurdo 1997, p. 155. Cf. also the following argument of Pasquale Voza: 'The concept of passive revolution, born as a radical re-elaboration of the expression of Cuoco, is always posited, even when it is referred to the *Risorgimento*, as a concept valid for connoting and interpreting the mode of formation of modern states in nineteenth-century continental Europe' (Voza 2004, p. 195).

³² The line comes from Matthew Arnold's *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*. Gramsci uses a remarkably similar phrase in one of the early *Prison Notebooks*: 'If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached

4.5. War of position

Yet the owl of Minerva only sets flight at dusk. It was only in this moment of its most profound crisis that the bourgeois 'ethical state' (civil society as an 'ethical content' tendentially subsumed by or re-articulated within a state-form, while remaining substantially—and not merely formally—independent from it) solidified into an 'integral State' in the fullest sense: that is, a dialectical unity of civil society and political society in which neither of the terms were annulled, but sublated and included within the new state-form. The beginning of the passive revolution witnesses an increasing 'protagonism of the state' in this broader sense.³³ In other words, it was only when its originally emancipatory content issued in its formal negation that the full dimensions and historical significance of the new type of political project set in progress by the bourgeoisie became apparent. Originating as organs of ethical and paedagogical renovation, the complex mechanisms of social advancement established by the hegemonic bourgeois class under the aegis of its own state apparatus were now transformed into so many obstacles. Previous roads to the cultural elevation embodied in the state ossified into a maze of trenches impeding access to a now defensive citadel. If hegemony in civil society had previously been the means by which the subaltern classes were provided with a real and substantive image of freedom, the 'camera obscura' of passive revolution guaranteed that they would now only receive its inverted spectral distortion. From this perspective emerged Gramsci's famous argument that the strategy of 'permanent revolution' (or the 'revolution in permanence', as employed by Marx and Engels) had been historically superseded.³⁴ Before the organic crisis of bourgeois society, before the institutional anchoring of the logic of passive revolution in the ossified and ossifying integral state, 'society was still in a state

from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (Q 3, §34; *SPN*, pp. 275–6). Deploying a rhetorical figure that had been central to the experience of *L'Ordine Nuovo*, Gramsci called such a crisis of confidence the possibility and necessity of 'creating a new culture' (*ibid.*).

³³ Liguori 2004b, p. 208.

³⁴ On the history of the transformation of this much-contested term, cf. the classic study of Löwy 1981.

of fluidity from many points of view, so to speak [...] a relatively rudimentary State apparatus, and a greater autonomy of civil society from State activity'. However,

in the period after 1870, with the colonial expansion of Europe, all these elements change. The internal and international organisational relations of the State become more complex and massive, and the Forty-Eightist formula of the 'Permanent Revolution' is expanded and superseded in political science by the formula of 'civil hegemony' [...] The massive structure of the modern democracies, both as State organisations and as complexes of associations in civil society, are for the art of politics what 'trenches' and permanent fortifications of the front are for the war of position.³⁵

4.6. 'War of position' versus 'war of movement'

The annals of German Social Democracy did indeed contain a precedent for such an argument that 'the war of movement increasingly becomes war of position',³⁶ a situation not chosen but "'imposed" by the general relations of forces' of an entire epoch.³⁷ It was Engels, and not Kautsky, who had first recognised that something had changed in the techniques of bourgeois domination that required a long-term strategic response from the political organisations of the working-class movements if they were successfully to pursue the goals of the forty-eightist 'revolution in permanence'. In his presentation of Marx's *Class Struggles in France* in 1895, Engels had argued that

far from winning victory by *one* mighty stroke, [the proletariat] has slowly to press forward from position to position in a hard, tenacious struggle.³⁸

³⁵ Q 13, §7; *SPN*, p. 243.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Q 13, §24; *SPN*, p. 234.

³⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 27, p. 513. The late Engels's remarks of course became a fundamental point of reference for the various waves of revisionism and 'legalism' that swept over the Second International. Indeed, Kautsky explicitly referred to this perspective in the 1910 debate on the mass strike. As Luxemburg was quick to remind him, however, Engels had developed this perspective precisely in order to criticise tendencies in the working-class movement that reduced its capacity for expansive political organisation—whether by means of insurrectionist rhetoric or 'pacifist' accommodations to the status quo. On this theme, cf. Grunenberg (ed.) 1970 and Salvadori 1979. Cf. also Texier 1998.

Later, as we will see, Lenin and Trotsky redeployed this insight, as counsel to the Communist Parties in the West to recognise the specificity of the class struggle in their social formations, characterised by a formidable defensive apparatus of the enemy that the Tsarist régime in Russia had lacked.³⁹ A revolutionary assault on the state in this context could not occur in the form of an immediate war of movement; but neither would it occur by postponing such a moment through a protracted *defensive* war of position, such as that pursued by the remnants of the Second International. Rather, an *offensive* war of position conducted by means of ‘an unprecedented concentration of hegemony’ had become the very form of an assault upon the foundations of the integral state.⁴⁰ ‘The truth is that one cannot choose the form of war one wants’,⁴¹ as Gramsci later noted, particularly when one begins from a subordinate position. ‘War of position’ in Gramsci’s conception, just as for Lenin and Trotsky, was not a programmatic strategy that he recommended be adopted by the proletariat. Rather, he recognised it as a technique of nascent ‘biopower’ deployed by the bourgeoisie, and to which the proletariat, subalternly confined in bourgeois civil society, was constrained to respond with a realistic political strategy.⁴²

4.7. Two forms of passive revolution

In order to substantiate his thesis, Gramsci further analysed the elaboration of the bourgeois integral state in terms of at least two distinct phases or forms of the ‘passive revolution’ in the late nineteenth century that confirmed and ratified its totalising logic. The bourgeoisie and its intellectuals of various ranks were engaged in a frantic attempt to preserve its established power. They did so not by means of consolidation and extension of its own project and the social

³⁹ Cf. Section 6.1.1.

⁴⁰ Q 6, § 138; *SPN*, p. 238.

⁴¹ Q 13, § 24; *SPN*, p. 234.

⁴² The concept of ‘biopower’ has recently become the subject of much discussion in political theory, due in large measure to Hardt’s and Negri’s reworking of Foucault’s ambivalent formulations. Cf. Hardt and Negri 2000, in particular p. 364. For an overview of some problematic aspects of the subsequent debate, cf. Toscano 2007. Recently Adam Morton has emphasised that Gramsci is a ‘paramount theorist of capillary power’ (Morton 2007, p. 92 et sqq.).

forces and movements that had vivified it, but through the prevention of the emergence of competing (organised and institutional) perspectives. The depoliticisation of politics—that is, the conversion of formerly expressly political debates into purely bureaucratic or technical questions—played a significant role in this conjuncture. Thus, in its early phases, the passive revolution proceeded as a cautious, defensive measure, molecularly absorbing leading figures of the subaltern classes and oppositional social movements into a consolidating state apparatus and its ‘representative’ organs in civil society. Confidence slowly returning to the ruling class and the new institutions hardening into durable forms, entire organisations were subsequently integrated. Gramsci’s immediate reference was to the *Risorgimento* and its aftermath, though its ‘stageist’ logic is applicable to the experience of other countries marked by a passive revolution in the strong sense.⁴³

Two periods of transformism: 1. from 1860 to 1900 ‘molecular’ transformism, i.e. individual political figures formed by the democratic opposition parties are incorporated individually into the conservative-moderate ‘political class’ (characterised by its aversion to any intervention of the popular masses in state life, to any organic reform which would substitute a ‘hegemony’ for the crude, dictatorial ‘dominance’); 2. from 1900 onwards transformism of entire groups of leftists who pass over to the moderate camp.⁴⁴

In one sense, there is an important distinction between these two phases or forms of passive revolution: while the first phase took a predominantly defensive form, the second phase was a form of cautious attack. This is particularly noticeable in terms of the increasing solidification of the state apparatus, its mechanisms of bureaucratic incorporation and the returning confidence of the ruling class in its assimilative capabilities, though now inflected into the terms of a perverted, Jesuitical manipulation rather than social and cultural elevation. In another sense, the two phases were mere variations on a theme, distinguished from each other more in quantitative than in qualitative terms. In its over-arching logic of disintegration, molecular

⁴³ For an example of the extension and specification of Gramsci’s thesis in other social formations, cf. Rehmann 1998 on Weber’s role in Germany’s passive revolution.

⁴⁴ Q 8, §36. The theme of *trasformismo* in the Italian *Risorgimento* first emerges in Q 1, §44, the first note in which Gramsci essays, among other central concepts such as hegemony, the concept of ‘passive revolution’.

transformation, absorption and incorporation, the passive revolution in both of its phases was single-mindedly dedicated to this one goal: prevention of the cathartic moment⁴⁵ in which the subaltern classes cross the Rubicon separating a merely 'economic-corporative' phase from a truly 'hegemonic' phase, or, in other words, the phase in which a subaltern social layer becomes a genuine class, architect and *faber* of an historical epoch.⁴⁶

4.8. Duration versus historical epoch

In both of its phases, the passive revolution was the time of duration [*la durata*] as opposed to that of an historical epoch [*l'epoca storica*], the latter of which, according to Alberto Burgio, is 'among the cardinal concepts of the Gramscian theory of history'.⁴⁷ In Burgio's own concise formulation,

duration is the modality of the development of an inert time, mere quantity adequately measured in chronological terms [...] it is a case of simple duration when an historical form persists, reproducing itself consistently in the force of the equilibrium between its own capacity of innovation and the progressive development of its own powers of 'viscosity' [...] duration is the 'normal phase' of life of individual social formations: the formal time of annals, an empty time.⁴⁸

Clearly, we are not far here from Benjamin's critique of the 'homogeneous, empty time' that underlies a degenerate notion of progress (and equally clearly, *pace* Althusser, we are a long way from a Hegelian conception of the present as the fullness of the concept in its immanence).⁴⁹ Gramsci's version of the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* is the notion of 'constituting an epoch [*fare epoca*]'. It

implies rupturing this *continuum*. To shatter its linearity—already in the womb of the preceding social formation—is to break into a new historical form, which arrives to fill up the empty space of the duration with an

⁴⁵ Catharsis is one of the key terms of Gramsci's politico-philosophical vocabulary. Cf. Chapter Seven.

⁴⁶ Cf. Q 3, §48, 'Past and present. Spontaneity and conscious direction'.

⁴⁷ Burgio 2002, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Burgio 2002, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁹ Benjamin 1969, p. 261.

event (an ensemble of events) which modifies the rhythm, the intensity, the meaning itself of historical movement, imparting to it an acceleration and determining its progress (or, at least, a leap of quality). To constitute a new epoch means to determine the passing away of the existing social formation, which has lived beyond itself and is now condemned to a simple 'duration': it means, that is, to radicalise the elements of crisis that have slowly been strengthened and, finally, to promote the advent of a different social formation, destined to live, for a longer or shorter period, an historically significant and operative life, bearer of real transformations.⁵⁰

It was precisely such a dialectical 'leap into the open air of history' that Gramsci proposed for the subaltern classes in the third and final movement of Q 8, § 2, in early 1932. Unable to continue its own 'ethical' project, the bourgeoisie opened the way for the emergence of a workers' movement capable of assuming the responsibilities of social and political leadership and carrying them to their logical conclusion.

A class positing itself as capable of assimilating the whole of society, and which is at the same time really able to express such a process, leads to the perfection of this conception of the State and of law, so as to conceive the end of the State and of law—rendered useless since they will have exhausted their function and will have been absorbed by civil society.⁵¹

The passive revolution endured; but the task of rupturing its continuum had been posed in realistic and historical terms with the emergence of the political demands of the organised workers' movement.

4.9. Crisis of authority

The entire period of passive revolution, descending from the Bismarckian years of iron to the Fordist production line and concomitant social re-organisation emergent in Gramsci's own time, was marked by recurrent frustrations for the popular classes seeking to break out of such empty time. It was a period of profound crisis and defeat for the working-class movement, all

⁵⁰ Burgio 2002, pp. 19–20.

⁵¹ Q 8, § 2; *SPN*, p. 260.

the more so seeing that it seemed to point towards a fundamental change of terrain from that on which the forty-eighters had manoeuvred, requiring a transvaluation of all values or 'revision' of the tenets of modern scientific socialism. Yet, this policy of 'permanent structural adjustment' *avant la lettre* was itself soon enough thrown into crisis, in the all-too-real trenches of World War I and, above all, by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The young Gramsci immediately grasped the significance of this revindication of the seemingly eclipsed 'Jacobin-Forty-Eightist' strategy of 'permanent revolution' or 'war of movement',⁵² famously saluting it as 'The Revolution against *Capital*'.⁵³ In so far as the Soviets demonstrated the return of a concrete possibility of an alternative modernity to that of a continual passive revolution steered by a degenerating bourgeoisie, it necessarily produced a crisis of confidence in existing régimes and gave stimulus to subaltern movements on an international scale. Gramsci referred to this new crisis within the organic crisis of bourgeois hegemony as a 'crisis of authority'.⁵⁴

This was particularly the case in the two Western-European countries in which passive revolution had been the rule rather than the exception for social transformation and modernisation in the later half of the nineteenth century. Both Italy and Germany were immediately wracked by profound social and political upheavals. The subsequent rise of Fascism in Italy and the crushing of the revolutionary workers' movement in the Weimar republic (ultimately paving the way for the emergence of National Socialism) were essentially attempts to manage this crisis by exaggerating and intensifying the logic of the antediluvian status quo (acceleration of 'revolution' from above, closer integration of state and political society, abolition of previous limited forms of independent political expression and organisation of subaltern groups).⁵⁵ If these reactionary movements succeeded in rebuffing a combative work-

⁵² Q 9, §133.

⁵³ Cf. Gramsci 1977, pp. 34–7.

⁵⁴ Q 3, §34.

⁵⁵ During 1932, Gramsci describes Fascism as the 'current' or 'actual form' of passive revolution, or the latest front of the war of position pursued by the bourgeoisie since the late nineteenth century (Q 8, 236; *FSPN*, p. 277; written in April 1932); after March 1921, Gramsci argues, there was 'war of position whose ideological representative for Europe, as well as its practical one (for Italy), is Fascism' (Q 10I, §9; *SPN*, p. 120; written in April–May 1932).

ers' movement, they nevertheless did not 'resolve the crisis of authority, but *suspend[ed]* its resolution: its intervention is therefore a merely negative one, not reconstructive of a new hegemony'.⁵⁶ An interregnum within an interregnum, therefore, empty time within empty time: a passive revolution within the passive revolution itself.

4.10. Modernity as passive revolution?

Had Gramsci's flight from the oscillating fatalism (permanent stabilisation, in one moment, imminent revolutionary outbreak, in the next) of the degenerated Comintern nevertheless led him to propose an equally fatalistic image, an image of modernity *tout court* as 'passive revolution'? How could a concept originally derived from a rather limited national experience—the year 1799 in Naples, in Cuoco's original formulation, a decade or so in Gramsci's analysis of the *Risorgimento*—be adequate to comprehend European-wide processes, for an entire epoch? Had Gramsci's expansion of this concept led him to promote merely a mirror image of precisely the type of abstract, metaphysical grand narrative to which, as we will see, he objected so strongly in Croce? Is the only difference that rather than a utopian narrative of the onward march of progress and freedom, Gramsci presents a dystopian vision of modernity as continual degeneration, an 'iron cage' of 'rationalisation'?⁵⁷

Gramsci himself expressed these doubts in later phases of his researches, throughout 1933 in particular. His response was to return to the concepts of the 1859 'Preface'. He argued, paraphrasing key phrases from Marx's text, that

the concept of passive revolution needs to be rigorously deduced from two fundamental principles of political science: 1) that no social formation disappears until the productive forces that have been developed in it find

⁵⁶ Frosini 2003, p. 128.

⁵⁷ This is a charge that has sometimes been brought against the 'neo-Gramscian' initiative in international relations. Cf. Gill 1993 for one of the founding texts of this tradition. Bieler and Morton 2007 provide a critical overview of the contemporary debate. Frosini 2007 provides some suggestive analogies between contemporary interpretations and an earlier, 'systemic', Eurocommunist reading.

a way to make an ulterior progressive movement; 2) that society doesn't pose itself tasks for the solution of which there are not already the necessary conditions.⁵⁸

The historical fact of passive revolution, according to one reading of these theses taken on their own, would seem to be proof that the capitalist mode of production had not yet been superannuated by reaching its own limits. The objective conditions for the emergence of an alternative mode of production, such as socialism, would then appear to be 'unripe', the classical historiosophical justification for reformism. Yet, immediately following these lines, Gramsci insisted that

one must understand that these principles first need to be developed critically in all of their significance and cleansed of any residue of mechanism and fatalism.⁵⁹

Passive revolution had not been necessitated by the economic structure of bourgeois society or inscribed in modernity as its *telos*. Rather, its successful imposition had involved conscious, political choices: on the one hand, the choice of the ruling classes to develop strategies to disaggregate those working classes and confine them to an economic-corporative level within the existing society, within determinate régimes of accumulation; on the other, the political choices of the subaltern classes that had resulted in a failure to elaborate their

⁵⁸ Q 15, § 17; *SPN*, p. 106; written in April–May 1933.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* Several months later, in June 1933, Gramsci limited the concept of passive revolution once again, insisting on its analytical usefulness in a determinant political conjuncture while rejecting its programmatic extension to the present: 'Danger of historical defeatism, i.e. of indifferentism, since the general way of posing the problem may induce a belief in a fatalism, etc. Yet the conception remains a dialectical one—in other words, presupposes, indeed postulates as necessary, a vigorous antithesis that can intransigently present all its potentialities for development. Hence theory of the "passive revolution" not as a programme, as it was for the Italian liberals of the *Risorgimento*, but as a criterion of interpretation, in the absence of other active elements in a dominant way. (Hence struggle against the political morphinism that exudes from Croce and from his historicism.) (It would seem that the theory of the passive revolution is a necessary critical corollary to the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*)' (Q 15, § 62). Recently, against a dominant interpretation that extends 'passive revolution' to the contemporary world (sometimes as a *passe partout*), Carlos Nelson Coutinho has insisted upon the concept's temporal limitation, suggesting that the related but distinct Gramscian notion of 'counter-reform' may constitute a more useful heuristic concept for the present. Cf. Coutinho 2007. For a creative application of passive revolution to contemporary geopolitics that insists upon an historicist approach, cf. Morton 2007.

own hegemonic apparatuses capable of resisting the absorptive logic of the passive revolution. In other words, the working classes—for different reasons in different countries, but with the same result—had not yet been able to socialise the ideological forms that corresponded to their own experiences of the conflicts within the economic structure of bourgeois society and thus lay the foundations for transforming it. They had remained subaltern to the superstructural elements of the existing ‘historical bloc’, unable to find ‘a way to make an ulterior progressive movement’,⁶⁰ as Gramsci called it in 1933, or as he had characterised it in early 1932, to pose themselves ‘as capable of assimilating the whole of society’ and thus to bring about ‘the perfection of this conception of the State and of law, so as to conceive the end of the State and law’.⁶¹

Gramsci’s response to this stalemate, this empty time of the passive revolution within the passive revolution, was to insist on the need to be ‘more political’. It is from this theoretical and political conjuncture that the Gramscian theory of hegemony emerges. ‘War of position, in politics, is the concept of hegemony’.⁶²

⁶⁰ Q 15, § 17; *SPN*, p. 106.

⁶¹ Q 8, § 2; *SPN*, p. 260.

⁶² Q 8, § 52.

Chapter Five

Civil and Political Hegemony

Gramsci's political evolution, from the years of *L'Ordine Nuovo* in the Turin workers' movement, through the founding years of the PCI, intense polemics with Bordiga, and direct involvement in the work of the International, to the early years of the still fragile Fascist régime, right up until his imprisonment and his final precarceral text (*Some Aspects of the Southern Question*), was defined by a singular and consistent concern: the attempt to elaborate a political theory which would be adequate to give expression to—and, just as importantly, to shape and guide—the popular and subaltern classes' attempts to awaken from the nightmares of their histories and to assume social and political leadership. This continuous arch is, however, marked by a gradual transformation of vocabulary, which becomes definitive in the early phases of the *Prison Notebooks*: the emergence of the concept of hegemony and its articulation of a constellation of elements that had previously been elaborated under other names (most notably, as Lo Piparo argued, the term 'prestige' derived from Gramsci's linguistic researches).¹ It is upon the concept of hegemony,

¹ For accounts tracking the emergence and transformation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, both in his precarceral texts and the *Prison Notebooks*, cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, Haug 1999, Frosini 2003 and Boothman 2005.

more than any other, that Gramsci's contemporary fame rests; indeed, his name is almost synonymous with it. According to an influential interpretation, the concept of hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* is distinguished by four features:

1. it denotes a strategy aiming at the production of consent, as opposed to coercion;
2. the terrain of its efficacy is civil society, rather than the state;
3. its field of operation is 'the West', the proper terrain of war of position, in its distinction from 'the East', suited to a war of movement;
4. and, finally, it can be applied equally to bourgeois and proletarian leadership strategies, because it is *in nuce* a generic and formal theory of social power.

The first three assumptions were succinctly tabulated in the presentation in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' of a 'first model' of the interrelationship of Gramsci's key terms:²

<i>East</i>	<i>West</i>
State	Civil Society
Civil Society	State
Coercion	Consent
Domination	Hegemony
Manoeuvre	Position

Anderson formulated the fourth assumption in similarly clear terms. Gramsci extended the concept of hegemony to include both proletarian and bourgeois forms, an expansion 'mediated through a set of generic maxims in principle applicable to either. The result was an apparently formal sequence of propositions about the nature of power in history'.³ These received assumptions, taken in their totality, remain today one of the most widely diffused images of Gramsci's thought. As we shall see, they reduce the dialectical complexity of

² Anderson 1976a, p. 26.

³ Anderson 1976a, p. 20.

Gramsci's concept, ultimately obscuring the novel analytical capacity assigned to it in the *Prison Notebooks*, its distinctively political focus and, above all, its consequences for the strategies of the organised working class.

5.1. Consent versus coercion

The first assumption asserts that hegemony, for Gramsci, involves a leading social group securing the (active or passive) consent of other social strata, rather than unilaterally imposing its decrees upon unwilling 'subjects'. It relies more upon subtle mechanisms of ideological integration than direct recourse to arms. In a pacific and benevolent version, this involves forging coalitions based upon negotiation and compromise between different interest groups. Hegemony is, here, understood 'from below', as, at least tendentially, democratic.⁴ In a cynical version, it corresponds to what Spinoza described as 'despotic statecraft', in which

the supreme and essential mystery [is] to hoodwink the subjects [...] so that men may fight as bravely for slavery as for safety, and count it not shame but highest honour to risk their blood and their lives for the vainglory of a tyrant.⁵

Here, hegemony is conceived from the standpoint of the hegemon, as a mechanism of mediated subordination.⁶ According to both versions, hegemony/consent is conceived as the opposite of direct domination/coercion. A further extension of this position argues that Gramsci's hegemony is therefore an alternative, 'consensual' political strategy for the working-class movement to that of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which relies largely upon coercive measures. This interpretation is based upon a series of notes in which Gramsci

⁴ This is perhaps the most widespread interpretation, at least as far as the appropriation and extension of Gramsci's thought for contemporary leftist political strategy is concerned. For an exception that proves the rule, cf. Day 2005.

⁵ Spinoza 1951.

⁶ It is this reading that predominated in the appropriation of Gramsci by Hall et al., for an analysis of the distinctive hegemonic strategy of Thatcherism in the UK in the 1980s.

counterposes 'consent' to 'force' or 'coercion',⁷ sometimes accompanied by the complementary binary oppositions of civil society and political society, hegemony and dictatorship.⁸

Anderson argued in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' that Gramsci's 'starting-point' for this formulation was Machiavelli's image of the Centaur, half-man and half-beast,⁹ yielding 'an explicit set of oppositions' between force and consent, domination and hegemony, violence and civilisation.¹⁰ Furthermore, Anderson claimed that Gramsci's 'emulation' of Machiavelli's image reversed the tendency of his predecessor: for whereas 'Machiavelli had effectively collapsed consent into coercion, in Gramsci coercion was progressively eclipsed by consent'.¹¹ This was due to a 'conceptual slippage' caused by,¹² on the one hand, prison censorship and, on the other, an overestimation of Croce's ethico-political history in which the accent fell upon consent in civil society rather than the force of the state. The result, according to Anderson, was the theoretical antecedent of those versions of left social democracy in the post-war period that argued that the Western parliamentary states relied primarily upon integrative-consensual strategies rather than brute displays of force. 'The main task of socialist militants' therefore became 'not combat with an armed State, but ideological conversion of the working class to free it from submission to capitalist mystifications',¹³ or, in other words, to subtract its consent from bourgeois rule and to win it for a proletarian hegemonic project.

5.1.1. 'Political leadership becomes an aspect of domination'

While Anderson refuted the assertion that hegemony was an alternative strategy to that of the dictatorship of the proletariat, his analysis of the relationship between consent and coercion nevertheless reproduced something of the formal logical presuppositions on which this position is based. He assumed, that is, that consent and coercion stand in an antinomial relation to each other,

⁷ Cf., e.g., Q 1, §48; Q 6, §87; *FSPN*, pp. 17–18; Q 7, §83; Q 8, §86; Q 13, §14; *SPN*, pp. 169–70; Q 13, §37; *FSPN*, pp. 92–4; Q 22, §13; *SPN*, pp. 310–13.

⁸ Cf. Q 6, §10; *SPN*, p. 270–2; Q 8, §48.

⁹ Anderson 1976a, p. 20.

¹⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 21.

¹¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Anderson 1976a, p. 28.

whereas Gramsci's analysis demonstrates in increasingly concrete and precise terms that their relationship can only be rationally comprehended as a dialectical one. Theoretically, this perspective is already announced explicitly in Gramsci's first notebook, in fact, in the first note in which the term hegemony appears, '*Political class leadership before and after assuming government*'.¹⁴ Hegemony is understood here not as the 'antithesis' of domination, as Anderson claimed;¹⁵ on the contrary, Gramsci explicitly argues that 'leadership' (in other words, following Lenin's synonymous usage, hegemony)¹⁶ constitutes a moment of domination, one of the concrete forms in which it is practised:

a class is dominant in two ways, that is, it is 'leading [*dirigente*]' and 'dominant'. It leads the allied classes, and dominates over the adversarial classes.¹⁷

Leadership-hegemony and domination are therefore conceived less as qualitatively distinct from one another, than as strategically differentiated forms of a unitary political power: hegemony is the form of political power exercised over those classes in close proximity to the leading group, while domination is exerted over those opposing it. Consent is one of the means of forging the 'composite body' of a class alliance, while coercion is deployed against the excluded other. A class's ability to lead, to secure the consent of allies, however, also relies upon its ability to coordinate domination over the opponents of this alliance, just as its capacity to exert such coercive force depends upon its prior securing of the consent of such an alliance. Gramsci then further distinguishes between two forms of leadership, this time in temporal terms. The first is a hegemony that tends towards, or forms the preconditions of, a future position of dominance; the second is a moment within such achieved dominance that assures that it is maintained.

Therefore, even before attaining power a class can (and must) lead; when it is in power it becomes dominant, but continues to lead [...] there can and must be a 'political hegemony' even before going to government, and

¹⁴ Q 1, §44; written in February–March 1930.

¹⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 21.

¹⁶ For Gramsci's frequent synonymous usage of hegemony and leadership, cf. Q 101, §7; Q 101I, §41x; in particular, see Gramsci's revision of Q 1, §44 in Q 19, §24, where he explicitly replaces 'political leadership [*direzione*]' with 'political hegemony'. For a discussion of this usage, see Hoare and Nowell-Smith's editorial notes in *SPN* and Bobbio 1990.

¹⁷ Q 1, §44; *SPN*, p. 57.

one should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony.¹⁸

Underlining the theoretical consequences of his argument, Gramsci states explicitly: 'Political leadership becomes an aspect of domination'.¹⁹

This dialectical integration of hegemony with domination, of consent with coercion, united in their distinction, was Gramsci's true 'starting-point'—and not 'emulation' of the Florentine Secretary's mythical figures, to which Gramsci only turns at an advanced stage of his researches.²⁰ Gramsci's first reference to Machiavelli's centaur in fact occurs in note Q 8, §86, written in March 1932—over three years after the beginning of the *Prison Notebook's* project, and over two years after Q 1, §44. A philologically precise reading of the *Prison Notebooks* reveals that Gramsci's formulation of the relationship between these categories was less inspired by Machiavelli's metaphor than articulated with it, at an advanced stage of his research, when he entered a period of revision and reformulation (partially overdetermined by a crisis of health and a change in the tempo and rhythm of his thought). This and similar allusions or metaphors represent not Gramsci's 'starting-points', but a very particular type of conceptual—or even 'mythical', in the Sorelian sense—summary of his previous research, prior to undergoing further elaboration.

Immediately following his real starting-point, he begins to deepen its conceptual and historiographical complexity, precisely in those passages that have often been invoked to support an opposition between consent and coercion. Thus, in Q 1, §48, Gramsci argues that

the 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary régime is characterised by a combination of force and consent, which counterbalance each other [*si equilibrano*], without force predominating excessively over consent; rather, it appears to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion.²¹

¹⁸ Q 1, §44.

¹⁹ Ibid. Buttigieg 1995 discusses these themes and common misreadings of Gramsci's notions of consent and civil society.

²⁰ Gramsci does indeed refer to Machiavelli in the early phases of his researches (cf. e.g. Q 1, §127). His interest, however, is primarily political and historical, rather than conceptual, at this stage; only later does he appropriate categories from Machiavelli in order to think through the conceptual determinations of his own political conjuncture.

²¹ Q 1, §48; cf. *SPN*, p. 80.

Coercion is not eclipsed here by consent (as Anderson's first model would have it); nor is their 'combination' conceived as a merely external relation, a sum of distinct parts (as in the second model). Rather, they 'counterbalance' each other in a unity that depends upon the maintenance of a precise, 'unbalanced' equilibrium between its two poles: force must not appear to predominate too much over consent, but the 'proper relationship [*giusto rapporto*]'²² between them in reality involves more weight on the side of the former.²³ In parliamentary régimes, coercion is the ultimate guarantee for consent, which in turn legitimates what could be described as a type of 'coercion by consent' (coercion of opposed classes, with the consent of allied social groups, crystallised as 'public opinion'). Domination is now conceived as including hegemony as one of its necessary moments, without which, as Gramsci stresses in a note with a concrete reference to the post-World-War I period, it rapidly enters into a crisis that threatens its very existence.²⁴

5.1.2. The 'dual perspective'

Similarly, the passage from an advanced stage of Gramsci's research in which Anderson thought to have found an 'explicit set of oppositions' between force and consent, domination and hegemony, in actual fact proposes something very different. Written between the middle of 1932 and early 1934,²⁵ this note is ostensibly a commentary on Machiavelli's figure of the centaur (it is based on the A text Q 8, §86 entitled 'Machiavelli' from March 1932, which Gramsci here transcribes with some significant precisions in the special notebook dedicated to the unarmed prophet's politics). The passage is, at the same time, a belated but timely intervention into debates of the early

²² Q 7, §16; SPN, p. 238.

²³ Anderson was thus incorrect to gloss this text by asserting that 'it can be assumed, without forcing the text, that Gramsci meant by this [i.e. "proper relationship"] something like a "balanced" relationship; in a letter written a year or so before, he refers to "an equilibrium of political Society and civil Society", where by political society he intended the State' (Anderson 1976a, p. 10). (cf. Gramsci 1993, 2, p. 67). 'Proper relationship [*giusto rapporto*]' here refers not to a balanced relationship (the adjective in this case would be *equilibrato*), but to the relationship proper to the modern state *qua* modern state. Similarly, the equilibrium of political and civil society is a (stable) 'disequilibrium'.

²⁴ Cf. Q 3, §34; SPN, pp. 275–6.

²⁵ Q 13, §14; SPN, pp. 169–70.

Comintern. At the Fifth Congress, Zinoviev had sought a tactical compromise of the 'optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect' that confronted the revolutionary downturn with the formula of 'two perspectives'; on the one hand, acceptance that the postwar revolutionary wave was subsiding, while, on the other hand, continuing hope of a possible revival.²⁶ In the depths of the Third Period, following carceral colloquia that led to his isolation, Gramsci sought to reformulate this inconsistent perspective as a coherent strategy for the Italian Communist Party in the expected post-Fascist conjuncture. He emphasised that the concrete relation of coercion and consent (just as the relationship of 'war of manoeuvre' and 'war of position') was governed neither by a logic of 'Either/Or', nor by a temporal distance (one coming after the other), but by their dialectical inclusion and implication. One emerged from the other and vice-versa, depending upon the specific conditions of the conjuncture, as a form of appearance of the other (that is, as its essential conjunctural form). Gramsci's real concern in this note, therefore, read in both theoretical and political context, was to emphasise the underlying dialectical unity within the commonly accepted oppositions he adumbrates at the outset. The passage in full reads as follows.

Another point which needs to be defined and developed is the 'dual perspective' in political action and in the life of the State. The dual perspective can present itself on various levels, from the most elementary to the most complex; but these can all theoretically be reduced to two fundamental levels, corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli's Centaur—half-animal and half-human. They are the levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the individual moment and of the universal moment ('Church' and 'State'), of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy, etc. Some have reduced the theory of the 'dual perspective' to something petty and banal, to nothing but two forms of 'immediacy' which succeed each other mechanically in time, with greater or less 'proximity'. In actual fact, it often happens that the more the first 'perspective' is 'immediate' and elementary, the more the second has to be 'distant' (not in time, but as a dialectical relation), complex and elevated. In other words, it may happen

²⁶ Cf. Zinoviev's intervention is found in *Kommunistische Internationale* 1924, particularly p. 42 et sqq.

as in human life, that the more an individual is compelled to defend his own immediate physical existence, the more will he uphold and identify with the complex and most noble values of civilisation and of humanity.²⁷

We could not be further away here from either an antinomian relationship of coercion and consent, or their simple (Gentilean) identification. Both sides of the 'asymmetrical' equilibrium undergo transformation in Gramsci's dialectical perspective of 'identity-distinction' (as he refers to the relation between civil and political society in Q 8, §142). Consent and coercion now figure as moments within each other, theoretically distinct but really united as moments (simultaneously *der Moment* and *das Moment*) of a political hegemonic project. In an earlier note, Gramsci had indicated the perspective that allowed him to develop this historical-dialectical relationship in concrete terms. He defined 'political hegemony', in the form of 'public opinion', as 'the point of contact' between 'civil society' and 'political society', between consent and force.²⁸ In other words, his decisive move was not an unconscious 'conceptual slippage', but, rather, the intentional articulation of this 'simple determination' with the more complex 'integral' notion of the state, or the similarly dialectical integration of civil and political society.

5.2. Civil society versus the state

The second assumption argues that Gramsci viewed the proper terrain of hegemony as civil society, rather than the state.²⁹ The opposition of consent and coercion, as qualitatively distinct political practices, is here reproduced in spatial terms, with each being assigned its respective sovereign zone within any given social formation. Civil society is the *patria* of consent and hegemony,

²⁷ Q 13, §14; *SPN*, pp. 169–70. 'Dialectical relation' is one of the most significant additions to the original A text (Q 8, §86) that makes theoretically explicit the non-antinomian articulation of these different political practices pursued by Gramsci since the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks*. Hoare and Nowell-Smith provide contextualising details on Zinoviev's original formulation, while Paggi provides a fuller account of the 'unstable equilibrium' that governed the Comintern atmosphere out of which this debate grew. Cf. *SPN*, p. 169, Paggi 1984, p. 122 et sqq. in particular.

²⁸ Q 7, §83.

²⁹ Against this assumption, cf. Buttigieg 1995.

while the state is the locus of coercion and domination. This definition would seem to be in accord with accepted usage in the modern social sciences, or at least in those currents influenced by Weber's famous definition of the state as the holder of a monopoly of violence in a geographically delimited area; in the 'non-political' remainder of any social formation, on the other hand, by far the most extensive of its component parts, there reign more pacific forms of negotiation and persuasion. This interpretation has often been proposed in the spirit of seeing Gramsci as a properly 'political', i.e. militant theorist, without illusions about the (bourgeois) state. Civil society is taken to be the terrain of a properly autonomous proletarian politics, in a reading which forces Gramsci to step forward as what might be described as a 'cultural syndicalist'. Taken to an extreme, however, this reading effectively presents Gramsci's concept of hegemony as a form of 'anti-politics'. It works away surreptitiously at the foundations of bourgeois rule in a molecular or even rhizomatic fashion in civil society; direct confrontation on the terrain of the state, that monopoly of the (officially) 'political' in bourgeois society, is deferred to a future that remains suitably indeterminate.

Once again, a series of quotations 'cruelly ripped' from context can be assembled to support this position. Anderson located some of the most representative of these, among which was the following note from an advanced stage of the *Prison Notebooks*, written in May–June 1932.

We can now fix two major superstructural levels—one that may be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and the other that of 'political society' or the State. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government.³⁰

The term 'levels' would seem to authorise a reading of this couplet as one of the exclusionary opposition of a spatial configuration. In an earlier formulation in a letter (from 7 September 1931), Gramsci seems to formulate the binary opposition in similarly clear terms, counterposing

³⁰ Q 12, §1; *SPN*, p. 12. This text is cited in this instance as it appears in Anderson's essay (Anderson 1976a, p. 22). We will have reason to return to examine it more closely.

political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus to ensure that the popular masses conform to the type of production and economy of a given moment) [to] civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the whole national society exercised through so-called private organisations, like the church, trade unions, schools and so on).³¹

‘Gramsci’s first and firmest answer [to the question of the location of hegemony]’, Anderson therefore argued, ‘is that hegemony (direction) pertains to civil society, and coercion (domination) to the State’.³² He acknowledged that Gramsci had indicated other possible configurations of these relations. In particular, the enigmatic formulation of ‘political hegemony’, accompanied by its correlate of ‘civil hegemony’, seemed to locate hegemony in civil society and the state alike.³³ However, it was the first model that was by far ‘the most important for the ulterior destiny of his work’.³⁴ It resulted in the ‘simple location of “hegemony” within civil society, and the attribution of primacy to civil society over the State’.³⁵ Once again, Gramsci was found to have unwittingly been the theoretical force behind the left social-democratic common sense of the postwar period.

It is the strategic nexus of civil society which is believed to maintain capitalist hegemony within a political democracy, whose State institutions do not directly debar or repress the masses.³⁶

Anderson admitted to having succumbed himself to this temptation in an earlier phase in a seminal essay for the ‘new’ New Left, ‘Problems of Socialist Strategy’, in which he advocated a ‘popular frontist’ strategy of strategic alliance between the British Labour Party and the middle classes on the terrain of civil society.³⁷ As with the complementary confusion regarding the importance of the coercive moment in parliamentary régimes, such a conception of the location of hegemony could not but result in the disarming of

³¹ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 67.

³² Anderson 1976a, p. 21.

³³ Anderson 1976a, p. 25.

³⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 26.

³⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 27.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

the Western Left in front of the distinctive challenges it faced in the specificity of the Western state as ‘ultimate guarantee’ for bourgeois political power.

5.2.1. Superstructural ‘levels’

As we have already seen, Gramsci does indeed distinguish between ‘civil’ and ‘political society’, as two constitutive moments of the integral state. Does Gramsci therefore conceive the relationship between what he here describes as two ‘superstructural levels’ as one of geographical mutual exclusion? A long tradition of Gramscian scholarship, including Bobbio’s seminal (and fiercely contested) contribution to international Gramsci conference in Cagliari in 1967 (published in 1969) and, following him, ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, has answered in the affirmative. This reading argues that Gramsci’s civil and political society is homologous with (a particular interpretation of) Marx’s famous *Basis-Überbau* metaphor. Both posit two separate levels in the capitalist edifice, the latter of which arises from the former, dependent upon but distinct from it; in effect, a separate ‘terrain’ of the capitalist social formation. References to the ‘ideological terrain’, dispersed throughout the *Prison Notebooks*,³⁸ would seem to support the argument that Gramsci also conceived of these ‘levels’ in such an architectural sense. On the other hand, subtle differences, such as Gramsci’s supposed exclusion from civil society of the economic (seemingly consigned to the ‘basement’ of a three story structure), have been explained as symptomatic of Gramsci’s departure from key tenets of the Marxist tradition, perhaps even of a return to a (supposedly Hegelian) hierarchical model of the social totality.

Several features of the passage under consideration, however, should alert us to the possibility of a more complicated and nuanced reading. First, Gramsci places the decisive term—‘levels’—between problematising quotation marks.³⁹ As Ragazzini’s thesis of Gramsci’s ‘philology of quotation marks’

³⁸ Cf., e.g. Q 4, §15; Q 4, §37; Q 4, §38; all written between May and October 1930.

³⁹ This punctuation was absent in the first thematic edition of the *Quaderni del carcere*. It is however present in the translation in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (SPN, p. 12). It is not found in the text cited in Bobbio’s ‘Civil Society in Gramsci’ (Bobbio 1990, p. 49), nor in Anderson’s citation in ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’ (Anderson 1976a, p. 21) (published after the appearance both of SPN and of Gerratana’s critical edition). Seemingly the preserve of pedants, a precise philological reconstruction of what Gramsci actually wrote in black and white is decisive for an accurate analysis of his concepts.

emphasises, this is an operation often employed throughout the *Prison Notebooks* to indicate the critical or metaphorical appropriation of a concept. The commonsensical meaning of a concept is maintained, as a type of shorthand, practically useful in order to indicate a line of research; at the same time, Gramsci clearly highlights his awareness of its conceptual imprecision. 'Levels', here, functions as a reference to the spatial metaphors of the prior Marxist tradition, while the problematising quotation marks suggest that Gramsci has something more complex in mind than mutually exclusive terrains. The provisional and tentative status of the description is even more strongly underlined by the context in which it occurs: 'we can fix, for now [*per ora*], two major superstructural "levels" — 'for now'.

Second, and even more importantly, the adjective 'superstructural' introduces a distinctively 'Gramscian' modification to this metaphor, even in its immediate commonsensical reference. As we have seen,⁴⁰ Gramsci's point of departure in this regard was his translation of the 1859 'Preface' to the *Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy*. In particular, Gramsci focused upon Marx's famous statement that

the sum total of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure.⁴¹

Gramsci supplemented this with Marx's later characterisation of the 'ideological forms' that make up the superstructure, which he took as licence to speak of 'superstructures', in the plural. The content of the concept of 'ideological terrain' is in fact translated into the plural, via the mediating concept of the 'terrain of the ideologies', into this formally new concept of the 'superstructures' or 'ideologies'. These are conceived less in spatial terms than as forms of social practice, or forms in which men know their conflicts based in the economic structure of society and fight them out. Gramsci continues to use the metaphor of 'terrain' to describe their ensemble, but the way in which he deploys it is such as to suggest that we have moved beyond the mutual exclusion implicit in a simplistic two-dimensional sense.⁴² In a certain sense, Gramsci radicalises

⁴⁰ Cf. Section 3.1.4.

⁴¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 29, p. 261; trans. modified.

⁴² Rehmann argues that Gramsci used the concept of 'terrain' strategically in order to avoid a subjectivist reading of Marx's forms of consciousness, as evidenced by

the base-superstructure metaphor by taking it literally: if the superstructures arise *upon* the economic structure, the former is then in fact coextensive with the latter, in a three-dimensional perspective, overlaying it. Expressed in non-spatial terms, the superstructures are agonistic forms that compete to become the essential form of appearance of a content that is itself contradictory—that is, they seek to resolve the contradictions in the economic structure of society of which they are the (more or less adequate) comprehension, either by pacifying and effacing them, or by emphasising their unstable nature and driving them to a moment of crisis.⁴³ Any individual or social group finds itself simultaneously participating in numerous superstructures, or becomes conscious of its historical conditions and tasks in a variety of forms; the attempt to resolve contradictions between them constitutes an important dimension of the struggle to build a coherent hegemonic project that unites an ensemble of superstructures with an economic structure in an historical bloc.

‘Civil society’ and ‘political society’, therefore, are conceived as ‘two major superstructural “levels”’ in this more complex three-dimensional spatial sense, or two major ‘ideological forms’ in which men become conscious of their conflicts in the ‘world of production’. In the passage quoted by Anderson, Gramsci explicitly avoids any pre-emptive geographical separation of the two. Rather, he draws a distinction between the different functions, not locations, which are only inexactly described by these concepts.

‘Civil society’, that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’ and [...] ‘political society or State’ [...] *correspond* on the one hand to the *function* of ‘hegemony’ that the dominant group exercises in the entire society and on the other hand to the *function* of ‘direct domination’ or command which is expressed in the State and in ‘juridical’ government [*che si esprime nello Stato e nel governo ‘giuridico’*].⁴⁴

Gramsci’s translation of the 1859 ‘Preface’: ‘Where the German text speaks of the “ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out”, Gramsci translates “in which” with “on which terrain [*nel cui terreno*]”, as if he wanted to prevent the common misunderstanding of mere forms of consciousness from the outset’ (Rehmann, 2004).

⁴³ Raymond Williams later developed a similar perspective on the role of the superstructure in a reformulated ‘cultural materialism’. Cf. Williams 1977, pp. 75–83 in particular. For a critique, cf. Eagleton 1989.

⁴⁴ Q 12, § 1; italics mine. The full context of these phrases makes Gramsci’s functional focus even clearer. For his immediate concern is not to define two distinct zones in

From a philologically accurate reading of this passage alone, no strict division between civil and political society, and therefore no ascription of Gramsci's concept of hegemony exclusively to one or the other 'terrain', would appear to be legitimate.

5.2.2. 'The concept of civil society as used in these notes...'

How, then, are we to understand Gramsci's conception of the relationship between these 'two major superstructural "levels"'? Gramsci himself gives an indication of his inspiration in one of the most contested notes of the *Prison Notebooks*. Prior to polemicising against a Catholic-doctrinal abasement of modern political life as 'mere' civil society (the Church being understood as the sovereign body of terrestrial life, or the 'State'), he specifies that it is necessary to distinguish between this perspective and the concept of

civil society as understood by Hegel and in the sense in which it is often used in these notes (that is, in the sense of the political and cultural hegemony of a social group over the whole of society, as the ethical content of the State).⁴⁵

Bobbio's 1967 intervention and the debate that followed in its wake established a particularly influential interpretation of this passage. According to Bobbio, it revealed that Gramsci

the social formation, but to clarify the particular modes of efficacy, in 'a gradation of functions', of intellectuals, conceived as 'functionaries' of the 'complex of superstructures'. Immediately following the sentences in question, he continues: 'The intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government. These comprise: 1. The "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. 2. The apparatus of State coercive power that "legally" enforces discipline on those groups who do not "consent" either actively or passively. This apparatus is, however, constituted for the whole of society in anticipation of moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed' (Q 12, § 1; *SPN*, p. 12).

⁴⁵ Q 6, § 24; *FSPN*, p. 75. Cf. the editorial note in *SPN*, p. 208, including a reference to the Bobbio-Textier debate. 'Gramsci did not succeed in finding a single, wholly satisfactory conception of "civil society" or the State' (*SPN*, p. 207).

derives his own concept of civil society not from Marx, but expressly from Hegel [and that the] Hegelian concept of civil society that Gramsci has in mind is a superstructural concept.⁴⁶

Whereas Marx had focused upon the economic dimensions of the *Philosophy of Right's* concept of civil society, Gramsci, according to Bobbio, emphasised the 'forms of organisation' of these relations,⁴⁷ equally crucial for Hegel, which arose within civil society and represented a first rudimentary step towards the more rational social organisation consummated in the state. Fundamentally, Bobbio's argument was that Marx's critical re-elaboration of the concept of civil society assigned it to the first term of the *Basis-Überbau* metaphor, whereas Gramsci's interpretation tended to stress its 'superstructural' dimension. Jacques Texier immediately responded in polemical terms. Texier rejected the notion that the conceptuality of the *Prison Notebooks* could be adequately reconstructed on the basis of Gramsci's concept of civil society. However, his alternative cornerstone—that of the 'historical bloc', as a dialectical unity of structure and superstructure—tends to transfer the question to another terrain (the articulation of politics and economics in the *Prison Notebooks*, rather than its implicit, strictly political theory) rather than resolving it. Subsequent interventions focused largely upon the implications of Bobbio's reading for the question of Gramsci's Marxist (-Leninist) 'orthodoxy' or lack thereof. A strong refutation of Bobbio's assertion that the 'key concept' of Gramsci's political thought 'is that of *civil society*' was not given.⁴⁸

However, as we have seen, Gramsci's key political concept is neither 'civil society' nor even 'political society'; rather, it is that of the 'integral State'. Viewed in this perspective, Gramsci's seemingly enigmatic reference becomes much clearer. The reason he signalled his affiliation to Hegel's concept of civil society (in polemical distinction, let it be remembered, from politically motivated 'theological' conceptions) was not because he wished to distance himself from Marx's particular focus upon its economic dimensions; in fact, *contra* Bobbio, Anderson and others, Gramsci's integral concept of civil society, taken in its internal distinction and unity, does not exclude the 'system of needs' or

⁴⁶ Bobbio 1990, p. 50.

⁴⁷ Bobbio 1990, p. 42 et sqq.

⁴⁸ Bobbio 1990, p. 42. The interventions were collected in Rossi 1969. Liguori 1996, pp. 138–43 provides the most comprehensive account of the debate.

‘relations of production’, but, rather, insists that they must be theorised in *political* terms.⁴⁹ Instead, Gramsci’s reference here aims to emphasise precisely the point on which Hegel and Marx are in substantial agreement, even if they draw radically opposed conclusions from it: namely, the immanent ‘statal’ dimensions of civil society, or civil society as the ‘ethical content of the State’.

5.2.3. The state as the ‘truth’ of civil society

One of the most significant dimensions of Hegel’s ‘Copernican revolution’ in state theory consisted in the elaboration of a notion of an articulated social totality, defined by its ‘vertical’ integration, rather than ‘horizontal’ differentiation, of different social and political practices. Hegel’s unitary conception of the social totality radically separates civil society and the state in an unprecedented manner, before uniting them again as dialectical moments in the substantiation and apprehension—that is, the actuality [*Wirklichkeit*—of the Idea as rational human community. In Gramsci’s terms, we could say that Hegel’s distinction between them is more ‘methodological’ than ‘organic’.⁵⁰ For Hegel,

⁴⁹ Cf. also Vostos 2001, pp. 85–91. Kebir 1991 provides a correction of historical perspective. Anderson argued that ‘in Gramsci, civil society does not refer to the sphere of economic relations, but is precisely contrasted with it as a system of superstructural institutions that is intermediary between economy and State’ (Anderson 1976a, p. 35). To support this argument, possibly derived from Bobbio, Anderson referred to the following passage: ‘Between the economic structure and the State, with its legislation and coercion, stands civil society’ (Q 10II, §15; *SPN*, p. 208). Crucial, however, is the specific context of this *bon mot*, which occurs in a polemic against the notion of ‘homo oeconomicus’, and also contains the following formulation: ‘The State is the instrument for bringing civil society into line with the economic structure, but the State has to “want” to do that, i.e. the representatives of the change that has already come about in the economic structure have to be in control of the State’ (ibid.). Is one thus to suppose that it is the state and not civil society that stands in a closer relation to the economy? Or, if one supposes that hegemony is confined to civil society, which is, in turn, conceived as separate from the economic, how does one explain Gramsci’s claim that ‘if hegemony is ethico-political, it cannot but also be economic, cannot but have its basis in the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive core of economic activity’ (Q 13, §18; *SPN*, p. 161)? In truth, the long debated claim that civil society for Gramsci is non-economic is a red herring that distracts attention away from the radical implications of Gramsci’s non-economistic concept of the economic itself. It is much more productive and fruitful to acknowledge, as Roberto Racinaro noted in 1997 in a belated reply to Bobbio, that civil society for Gramsci ‘no longer designates the sphere of economic relations *separated* from the sphere of political relations. It designates a situation that does *not* correspond to the *distinctions* of the liberal State’ (Racinaro 1997, p. 378).

⁵⁰ Q 4, §38; Q 13, §18. ‘Methodological’ should not be understood here as ‘inessential’, as an arbitrary imposition by thought upon an object that remains indifferent to it.

bourgeois-civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] and state are not to be distinguished in spatial terms, as distinct locations or regions of a social formation.⁵¹ On the contrary, civil society and state (as well as the often forgotten third and most immediate figure in Hegel's tripartite schema, the family) are, if we should choose to think of them in these terms, geographically coextensive with each other; each sphere is 'superimposed' upon or 'subterranean' to the others. Translating this perspective into another vocabulary which is not that of the *Philosophy of Right*, we could say that the *ideae* of civil society and the state have the same *ideatum*: the former comprehends human sociality under the aegis of the necessity of particularity, while the latter seeks to grasp freedom or the self-determination of universality as constituting its essence. These perspectives do not annul or exclude each other because one is capable of sublating (*aufheben*, in the fullest Hegelian sense of simultaneous cancellation and preservation) the other and explaining its particularity as a moment of its own self-determined universality.

'Contrary to a widely held view', as Kouvelakis has argued,

Hegel's conception of the state is no more 'totalitarian' than it is absolutist.

Far from deprecating civil society, it mobilizes the mediations produced

For Gramsci as for Hegel, the distinction is a *real* analytical distinction, internal to the thing itself as a moment of its self-constitution through self-differentiation.

⁵¹ Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, derived to a large extent from his engagement with the concept of 'civil society' of the Scottish Enlightenment, is only inaccurately retranslated back into English with a formal repetition of the original term. The use of 'civil society' can lead to confusion between Hegel's distinctive concept and pre-Hegelian formulations, including those of Ferguson, Smith et al., that ultimately remain within the classical problematic of *societas civilis*, defined in opposition to nature. Furthermore, the resonance of 'civil society' in English (and other languages) has diverged even more markedly in the intervening period, to the point where it is now effectively taken to imply practices that are exterior to the state. The predominance of this definition was evident in the flowering of civil society rhetorics after 1989 and continues today in certain liberal definitions of NGOs as extra-statal institutions. In order to avoid such confusions, it therefore seems useful to propose 'bourgeois-civil society' as a more accurate translation of the Hegelian concept, though with the caveat that the double adjective should be understood in an integral sense, i.e., it does not imply the possibility of non-bourgeois forms of civil society. Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is explicitly limited to the historical period that begins with the bourgeoisie's rise and consolidation as the dominant social and political class. With the disappearance of this class and its state, a new form of society will emerge that will be neither bourgeois nor merely civil, but a political society 'reabsorbed' into civil society; in Gramsci's mature terms, a 'self-regulated' social formation.

by civil society in order to invest them with a new legitimacy and permit them to participate in the creation of unity while maintaining/sublating their particularity.⁵²

Indeed, not only did the mature Hegel valorise civil society as the great 'achievement of the modern world which has for the first time given all determinations of the Idea their due';⁵³ in its modern sense, as distinct from the state, he practically invented the concept.⁵⁴ Civil society, for Hegel, is, among other things, a 'system of needs [*das System der Bedürfnisse*]' that remain unresolved in their mutual (mis) recognition, confronting each other as antinomies: either this particular need or that other need is satisfied, but not both. The civil society of the *Philosophy of Right* is the social concretisation of what the *Phenomenology of Spirit* had earlier called the 'force of the Understanding [*der Verstand*], the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power'.⁵⁵ It

⁵² Kouvelakis 2003, p. 40. Cf. Pelczynski 1984, p. 5.

⁵³ Hegel 1942, *Philosophy of Right* (PR) §182A. In PR §260, Hegel emphasises that 'the principle of modern states has prodigious strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to progress to its culmination in the extreme of self-subsistent personal particularity, and yet at the same time brings it back to the substantive unity and so maintains this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself'. Cf. also PR §124R. The young Hegel's thought had been characterised by an almost 'aggressive' nostalgia for the lost organic communities of antiquity and fierce rejection of both the individualism of modern civil society and the State *in toto* (Lukács 1975). As Pelczynski has argued, the great advance of the *Philosophy of Right* over the 'polis-fetishism' of Hegel's Jena period is to have 'recognised civil society as an area where individualism found legitimate scope and could express itself safely without harming the community' (Pelczynski 1984, p. 5). Cf. also the following battlecry from Hegel's earliest philosophical text: 'There is no idea of the State, because the State is something *mechanical*, just as little as there is an idea of a *machine*. Only what is an object of freedom is called an idea. We therefore have to go beyond the State!' (Hegel 1991, p. 609). In this perspective, the state-centrism of Hegel's maturity can be understood, at least in part, as the result of the inherent instability and tendency to overcorrection of an undeclared self-criticism.

⁵⁴ Throughout Western political philosophy prior to Hegel, civil society and state functioned as synonyms, in the sense of Locke's 'civil or political society', in opposition to a natural order. Cf. Bobbio 1990, Pelczynski 1984, Riedel 1969, Losurdo 2004. Hegel regarded the distinction between civil society and the State as his crowning achievement (cf. PR §260). As Riedel emphasises, this new theoretical concept was at the same time a political intervention. 'It is the non-applicability of inherited ancient concepts from the field of old politics to the social constellation of the revolutionary century which becomes in 1820 the crucial point of Hegel's formation of the concept of 'bourgeois-civil society' as the sphere of difference between State and family' (Riedel 1969, p. 153).

⁵⁵ Hegel 1977, p. 18.

is a force of division, fragmentation and particularity, while the state, on the other hand, corresponds to the integrative, unifying and universal dimensions of Reason [*die Vernunft*].

However, Hegel's concept of civil society is not exhausted by what Marx, at least according to one influential interpretative tradition, later comprehended in narrowly economic terms as 'relations of production'.⁵⁶ It also includes juridical administration [*Rechtspflege*], the *Polizei* (used to describe not only the police as in contemporary currency but also the system of social and economic regulation in the broadest sense) and voluntary associations or corporations. These are not contingent supplements to an originary system of needs, but necessary to its production and functioning in the modern world: Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* is not a 'state of nature' or a *bellum omnia contra omnes* plus salons,⁵⁷ but an 'ethical power' that has itself already been fundamentally reshaped as a *bourgeois*-civil society by the ethical power of the bourgeois state.⁵⁸ As Riedel notes, 'the society would not be 'bourgeois-civil [*bürgerliche*]' if it were not legally, ethically and politically ordered and

⁵⁶ It is true that Marx, like many before and after him, focused upon the economic dimensions in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. For an account of this tradition of reception, see Riedel 1969, pp. 135–6. Marx's integral concept of 'relations of production', however, is not in fact limited to an abstractly 'economic' sphere, but includes its juridical and political overdetermination as constitutive elements of its relationality. As Gramsci noted, in Marx 'there is contained *in nuce* the ethico-political aspect of politics or the theory of hegemony and consent, beyond the aspect of force and of economics' (Q 10II, §41x).

⁵⁷ As Marx seemed to suggest in an impatient formulation in a letter to Engels, while criticising Darwin's 'Malthusian' flirtations: 'It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes* and is reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in which civil society figures as an "intellectual animal kingdom", whereas, in Darwin, the animal kingdom figures as civil society' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 41, p. 380).

⁵⁸ Hegel 1942, PR §257. Against a popular image of Hegel's purely *logical* derivation of civil society from the state, it should be noted that on at least one occasion he explicitly argues that the latter *temporally* precedes the former. Civil society's 'full development occurs later than that of the State, which it must have before it as a self-sufficient entity in order to subsist' (PR §182A). Whether or not this is a genuinely historical distinction, rather than a formally temporal one, remains open to interpretation; a reading of the context of this passage (diremption of the medieval world, its division into the modern realms of economics and politics) would suggest that the historical reading is at least implicit. As we will see, the displacement of this insight from an historical to a logical/metaphysical register (already present in potentially ambiguous formulations and perhaps overhasty transitions in the *Philosophy of Right* itself) had a decisive impact upon subsequent readers' attempted 'completion' of this fundamentally fragmentary 'non-work'.

held together'.⁵⁹ Insofar as it necessarily includes these mediating elements of social and political organisation, it already demonstrates a tendency towards the rational organisation that, properly conceived, is a quality of the state. To use terms drawn from different phases of Althusser's development, civil society is a relatively autonomous sphere overdetermined by the social whole (i.e. the state) of which it is an integral component; or, expressed in a juridical form, civil society emerges as subject of modern life only insofar as it is already interpellated by the state from which it is thereby distinguished.

In this perspective, civil society is not simply opposed to the state. Rather, it is a stage of 'difference' 'between the family and the state'; insofar as it is precisely this dialectical difference, it 'presupposes the state'.⁶⁰ More precisely, civil society for Hegel is dialectically penetrated by the state, which, in its turn, is eventually found to be the 'true ground of the family and of civil society'.⁶¹ Or, in another revealing formulation reminiscent of Gramsci's description of the 'superstructures of civil society' as a system of trenches and fortifications protecting the state from immediate assault,⁶² civil society is the state itself, in one of its forms of appearance, 'the external state, the state based on need, the state as the Understanding envisages it [*Not- und Verstandestaat*]'.⁶³ Just as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* discovers that Reason is immanent to the Understanding, so the *Philosophy of Right* comes to grasp the state as an immanent principle of rationality animating social life, distinguished from civil society not as its irreducible other, but as the alterity that it must carry within itself in order to be that which it is. In this sense, the state is not a distinct location, but 'the actuality of the ethical idea',⁶⁴ 'a system of systems, and, like philosophy, a circle of circles' that includes civil society as a constitutive moment.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Riedel 1969, p. 160.

⁶⁰ *PR* §182A. Equally, it presupposes the family; in this sense, civil society is the 'vanishing mediator' of particularity between the individuality of the family and the universality of the state. Cf. Riedel 1969, p. 153.

⁶¹ *PR* §256.

⁶² *Q* 13, §24; *SPN*, p. 235; cf. also *Q* 13, §7; *SPN*, p. 243.

⁶³ *PR* §183. Cf. Pelczynski's concise formulation: 'Civil society is the modern State conceived as a system of public authorities and autonomous bodies existing to further the private interests of individuals or their more or less organised groups, to protect their legal rights as persons, property, contract and so on, and to reinforce their mutual obligations' (Pelczynski 1971, p. 10).

⁶⁴ *PR* §257.

⁶⁵ Lefebvre 1976, p. 129.

5.2.4. The ‘particularity’ of the integral state

It is precisely this (and *only* this) dimension of Hegel’s dialectical vision of the constitution of civil society, as a moment of particularity within what could be described as a concept of the ‘integral State’ *avant la lettre*, to which Gramsci signals his affiliation. Clearly, Gramsci does not accept every dimension of Hegel’s theory of the state. Above all, against the pacific vision of an omnipresent state as the ‘actuality of the ethical Idea’ in its universality, Gramsci’s notion of an integral state emphasises its fundamental partiality, as the solidified, articulated structure of the rule of one particular class.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, there are important formal similarities between their theories at the level of the conceptualisation of the specificity of civil society within an internally differentiated, dialectically unified state-form. In both Hegel’s and Gramsci’s versions, civil society is not an uncompromised ‘pre-political’ realm that lies beyond, or comes before, the state. Rather, it is an ensemble of practices and relations dialectically interpellated by and integrated within the state. In the terms Gramsci derived from the Marxist tradition and deployed in *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* to describe the ‘hegemony of the proletariat’, civil society constitutes the state’s ‘social basis’;⁶⁷ in the terms he derived from his reading of Hegel, it is the ‘ethical content of the State’.⁶⁸ As one of the ‘two major superstructural “levels”’, or ‘ideological forms’ of the integral state, Gramsci’s civil society has a *dialectical, non-exclusionary and functional* relation-

⁶⁶ Some suggestive insights in this direction are provided in Durst 2005.

⁶⁷ Gramsci 1978, p. 443; cf. Q 6, §136.

⁶⁸ Q 6, §24; *FSPN*, p. 75; *SPN*, p. 208. From the earliest phases of his researches, Gramsci had identified this as a central feature of Hegel’s political thought, deriving from his reflection upon the French Revolution: ‘Hegel’s doctrine of parties and associations as the “private” woof [or articulated content = *trama*] of the State. This derived historically from the political experiences of the French Revolution, and was to serve to give a more concrete character to constitutionalism. Government with the consent of the governed—but with organised consent, and not generic and vague as it is expressed in the instant of elections. The State has and demands consent, but it also “educates” this consent, by means of the political and syndical associations; these, however, are private organisms, left to the private initiative of the ruling class. Hegel, in a certain sense, thus already transcended pure constitutionalism and theorised the parliamentary State with its party system. But his conception of association could not help still being vague and primitive, halfway between the political and the economic, according to the historical experience of the time, which was very limited and offered only one perfected example of organisation—the “corporative” (politics rooted in the economy)’ (Q 1, §47; *SPN*, p. 259; written in February–March 1930).

ship to that other major superstructural 'level', or form, of 'political society or State'⁶⁹—a relationship whose specific nature, as we will see, is crucial for determining the 'location' of (civil and political) hegemony.

Nevertheless, despite this decisive similarity, there is a radical difference between Hegel and Gramsci, in terms both of the *reasons* they give for the emergence of such a relatively autonomous but overdetermined dimension of modern societies, and of the *conclusions* they draw from it. In this respect, Gramsci's concept of an integral state composed of civil and political societies can be regarded as a rational translation and historicist explanation of his predecessor's 'incomplete' concept. Gramsci's analysis of the transformation of the revolutionary bourgeoisie's ethical state into the integral state of the passive revolution beginning in the late nineteenth century, protected from immediate assault by the defensive 'trenches' of civil society, concurs with Hegel's argument that the full development of civil society, as the 'external State',⁷⁰ 'occurs later than that of the state'.⁷¹ Like Hegel's *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, Gramsci's *società civile* presupposes the state 'in order to subsist'. As does Hegel, Gramsci holds that 'immature States' are those in which the 'State is everything', or 'in which the Idea of the State is still veiled and where its particular determinations have not yet attained free self-subsistence'.⁷² Hegel even comes close to formulating a theory of hegemony, albeit in subjectivist terms, when he writes that

commonplace thinking often has the impression that force holds the State together, but in fact its only bond is the fundamental sense of order that everybody possesses.⁷³

However, whereas Hegel's speculative philosophical grammar allowed this insight, in a determinate political conjuncture, to be 'translated' (and then,

⁶⁹ Q 12, § 1; *SPN*, p. 12.

⁷⁰ *PR* § 183.

⁷¹ *PR* § 182A.

⁷² *PR* § 260A.

⁷³ *PR* § 268A. As Avineri notes, Hegel sees the modern State as requiring 'increasingly less coercion' (Avineri 1971, p. 193)—precisely because its trenches in 'civil society' provide it with a formidable apparatus for 'educating' public opinion. 'Through the organs of "civil society", the State recognizes and promotes private interests, but in the process individuals learn to recognize public interests as their own basic interests and acquire the will to promote "the universal" even when it negates "the particular"'. The process of political education (*Bildung*) begins in "civil society" and continues in the "political state"' (Pelczynski 1971, p. 17).

in another theoretico-political conjuncture descending to the present day, ‘retranslated’) into the metaphysical vision of a superterrestrial state as ‘the march of God in the world’,⁷⁴ Gramsci explains this real primacy of the state historically and politically.⁷⁵ As the *Prison Notebooks*’ extensive historical analyses demonstrate, this state emerged as the consolidated political form of a very specific ‘civil society’, namely, the bourgeois-civil society that was developed in the long arch of the bourgeoisie’s economic-corporative struggle.⁷⁶ Passing through various phases of elaboration, it eventually assumed hegemony in society as a whole and gave concrete institutional form to its own distinctive ‘political society’. It is with his reformulation of this last concept that Gramsci proposes a novel solution to a *lacuna* that lies at the heart of the Hegelian theory of the state, from which the Marxist tradition takes its point of departure: the transition between civil society and the state. At the same time, nothing more clearly indicates Gramsci’s agreement with—and, further, more empirically detailed elaboration of—the fundamental elements of the young Marx’s critique of Hegel’s ‘pantheistic mysticism’ and concomitant valorisation of civil society as the ‘secret’ of the state.

5.2.5. Civil society as the ‘secret’ of the state

The ‘definitive’ text of the *Philosophy of Right* contains contradictory concepts of the state. Their unresolved and perhaps irresolvable nature was decisive for that work’s later troubled reception.⁷⁷ As we have seen, Hegel’s primary definition of the state is that it is the ‘actuality of the ethical idea’,⁷⁸ immanent

⁷⁴ *PR* §258.

⁷⁵ Losurdo 2004 provides a comprehensive account of the political overdetermination of the reception of Hegel’s thought, definitively dispelling the lingering caricature of Hegel’s valorisation of the state as a ‘reactionary accommodation’ to the restoration status quo through a careful comparative analysis.

⁷⁶ Tellingly, Gramsci initially translated Hegel’s *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* with *società borghese*, before reverting to the traditional term, for specific reasons related to the development of his own concepts.

⁷⁷ The four volumes of Hegel’s texts and lectures treating political philosophy edited by Ilting between 1973–5 (Hegel 1973–5) provide the most comprehensive survey of the evolution of his ideas. Texts discovered after the publication of this landmark edition edited by Heinrich (Hegel 1983) and the lecture notes taken by Wannenmann (now in Hegel 1995) provide important additions to our knowledge of Hegel’s faltering development and reversals under the pressure of a dynamic political conjuncture.

⁷⁸ *PR* §257.

to both the family and civil society as their simultaneous ground and *telos*: the 'actuality of concrete freedom'.⁷⁹ This definition pervades Hegel's political philosophy from beginning to end.⁸⁰ However, when he comes to consider the institutions of the modern state as a determinate moment of this actuality in the final movement of the *Philosophy of Right*, he also develops another, more limited concept: 'the *organism* of the State, the strictly "political" State [*der eigentlich "politisch" Staat*] and *its constitution*'.⁸¹ Unlike the earlier formulation, this concept seems to herald a return to a concept of the state as a governmental apparatus, in accordance with accepted modern usage (such as Hegel himself had deployed in an early unpublished text on the German constitution). The precise relationship between these two concepts ('State' in the broader sense of ethical life and the 'strictly political State') remains notoriously unclear in a text that was only published in its 'canonical' form, it should be remembered, long after Hegel's death.⁸²

It was this ambivalence that constituted the primary point of contention for Hegel's immediate inheritors in the advanced *Vormärz*. Famously, those who came to be called the Hegelian 'Right' argued that there was a substantive continuity between the two terms: the existing Prussian 'strictly political State' was argued to be the necessary appearance of the 'State' as the reality of

⁷⁹ *PR* §260.

⁸⁰ Cf. e.g. *PR* §33.

⁸¹ *PR* §267. The content of this concept is perhaps better captured by the (admittedly very free) translation of 'the empirically existing State apparatus of juridico-political institutions and governance'. In other words, Hegel uses the concept of the 'organism of the State' or the 'strictly political State' to indicate the spatially, functionally limited political institutions of governance, while reserving the unqualified term for the pervasive ethical life it attempts to organise. Significantly, the concept of the 'strictly political State' does not appear in Hegel's lectures on political philosophy from 1818/19 (known as *Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft*, after the notes taken by Homeyer); there, the equivalent to the 'organism of the State' is the potentially much less ambiguous term of the '*mechanism of the State*' (Hegel 1973–5, Volume 1, p. 326; §118).

⁸² Space and the main purpose of this study does not allow an exhaustive survey of the extensive literature that has drawn attention to this constitutive ambivalence of the *Philosophy of Right* and attempted to offer a coherent solution to it. Among more recent literature, representative positions can be found in Avineri 1971 and 1972 in particular (Hegel's concept of the state as both instrumental and immanent), Pelczynski 1971 and 1984a (Hegel's terminological confusion between two concepts of the state, designating respectively ethical and political orders) Ilting 1973 (the *Philosophy of Right* as a phenomenology of the consciousness of freedom, compromised by Hegel's accommodation to the climates of the Karlsbad Decrees) and, more recently, Kouvelakis 2003 (the state as the true ground of the sphere of *Sittlichkeit*, but lacking the mediations introduced by Marx's critique).

ethical life, Spirit comprehended at the level of objective Spirit.⁸³ Existence was equated with reality [*Wirklichkeit*], thus translating Hegel's famous maxim ('Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig') into an endorsement of the post-restoration state of affairs.⁸⁴

On the other hand, the self-styled Hegelian Left, above all the young Marx, argued that the internal contradictions of Hegel's theory of the state called for an immanent critique. Hegel, according to the young Marx, despite his professed aim, was unable to produce an account of the modern state as an organic totality. In particular, he was unable to explain the transition from the 'external State' or civil society to the 'strictly political State' in genuinely immanent terms. Instead, he resorted to a conception of the state which was 'immanent' to the family and civil society only in the sense that it preceded them, as the actuality of ethical life, as a transcendent that subsequently realised itself in the finite form of the state as an institutional instance above civil society. For Hegel, as we have seen,

the state as such is not so much the result as the beginning. It is within the State that the family is first developed into civil society, and it is the Idea of the State itself which disrements itself into two moments.⁸⁵

Marx objected that this formulation presents the state as the true subject of history, whereas for Marx, it is civil society that is the secret of the state: 'The fact is that the State issues from the mass of men existing as members of families and of civil society'.⁸⁶ According to one influential interpretative current, Marx's 1843–4 critique of Hegel's state theory thus essentially draws upon Feuerbach's famous critique of Hegel's subject/predicate inversion. Marx's novel move, according to this interpretation, was thus merely to have extended the reach of Feuerbach's critique from religion to politics, in accordance with the famous formulation from *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. *Introduction*:

⁸³ PR §258R.

⁸⁴ Tellingly, Hegel 1983 contains the following variation that is less open to an accommodationist distortion: 'Was vernünftig ist, wird wirklich und das Wirkliche wird vernünftig [what is rational becomes real and the real becomes rational]'. Ilting 1973 contains further passages from letters in which Hegel himself objects to such contentedly *spießig* interpretations.

⁸⁵ PR §256.

⁸⁶ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 56.

the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law*, and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*.⁸⁷

The decisive dimension of the young Marx's nascent ideology-critique, however, does not lie simply in the adoption of Feuerbachian motifs, but in the development of the critique of the 'speculative hypostatisation' at the heart of Hegel's philosophical method *tout court*. Hegel's speculative grammar presented a point of arrival—in this instance, the state—as a point of departure. The problem of the transition between civil society and the state is thereby annulled, because there is, in fact, no transition necessary between these orders: if the state (as the reality of ethical life), is already present in civil society, the emergence of the 'strictly political State' can simply be grasped as the state immediately becoming manifest as that which it is, the concrete form, at the level of objective Spirit, in which the contradictions of civil society are resolved (or rather, effaced, insofar as they are now revealed to have been only apparent contradictions, ruses of a Spirit that had already prepared their *Ver-söhnung* in its higher form).

Crucially, Marx was not content to condemn this operation, in a Feuerbachian fashion, as a speculative distortion. On the contrary, 'Hegel is not to be blamed', Marx argues, 'for depicting the nature of the modern State as it is, but rather for presenting what *is* as the *essence* of the State'.⁸⁸ For Marx, Hegel's speculative hypostatisation provided an all-too-true likeness of reality, a mimetic failure in the fullest sense: Hegel's categories merely imitated and thereby ratified an appearance that was no mere expression of an essence, but had been produced by the suppression of a complex series of political mediations.⁸⁹ The actually existing 'strictly political State' does not immanently resolve the contradictions of civil society; as a false universality that is in truth a particularity—that is, the institutionalisation of the interests of one class, over and against those of others,—it exacerbates them. By positing civil soci-

⁸⁷ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 3, p. 176.

⁸⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 89. Gramsci develops Marx's critique of Hegel's speculative method with his concept of a 'philosophical novel' (or 'romance', in the classical sense) and the need to translate speculative and subjectivist terms into the rational and political vocabulary of the superstructures (cf. Section 7.2.8). In similar terms, Gramsci develops further Marx's critique of Hegel's confusion between the existence and essence of the state with his analysis of the emergence of the integral state.

⁸⁹ Cf. Colletti 1975.

ety as the true secret of the state (in both senses, i.e. as *Sittlichkeit* and apparatus), Marx simultaneously proposed two research projects, one critical and the other exploratory, which succinctly define the problematic of the Marxist theory of the state: on the one hand, the analysis of the short-circuits whereby the bourgeois state achieved a false transition between civil society and its 'strictly political State'; and, on the other hand, the challenge of delineating an 'organic' transition between civil society and its organising instance in the state, such as would be no transition at all but rather the self-organisation of a society that had dispensed with the need for a spiritual supplement.

5.2.6. Political society 'sive' State?

Gramsci attempted to explain the transition between civil society and the state by introducing the concept of 'political society or State' as a superstructural 'level' *alongside* that of civil society *within* the integral state. This potentially ambiguous equation led to confusions even for his most attentive readers. 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' argued that most probably 'by political society [Gramsci] intended the State';⁹⁰ by the term 'State', Anderson seemed to have intended what is more exactly called the state apparatus. However, in a second moment, discussing Gramsci's 'general notion of the State', he noted a troubling discrepancy:

here the distinction between 'political society' and 'civil society' is maintained, while the term 'State' encompasses the two.⁹¹

This seemed to indicate that Gramsci had something else in mind when he used the term 'political society' than a definition of the state that could be regarded as 'traditional'. Such doubts were reduced, however, by suggesting that this was best understood as an imprecision introduced by the 'sudden shifts', 'slippages' and 'oscillations' of meaning that deformed the *Prison Notebooks*. In truth, 'political society' was 'an express synonym for the State',⁹² perhaps even merely Gramsci's 'personal' idiosyncratic appellation for a concept the content of which was not in dispute. Thus, soon after, Anderson argued that the

⁹⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 10.

⁹¹ Anderson 1976a, p. 13.

⁹² Ibid.

opposition between political society and civil society [...] as we know is one of Gramsci's variants of the couplet State and civil society.⁹³

And, indeed, certain formulations would seem to permit the reading that this term is merely a euphemism for the state apparatus. For example, Gramsci's central post-statist concept of the 'regulated society',⁹⁴ founded upon the 're-absorption of political society in civil society',⁹⁵ could be read in terms of the cancellation of a separate (class) state apparatus by the institution of a democracy of the (economic) base, or civil society, such as was attempted by the Soviets. Similarly, the contraposition of civil society and political society as 'self-government' as opposed to 'government of functionaries' is easily assimilable to the traditional schema.⁹⁶ Above all, Gramsci's definition of the state as 'an instrument of "rationalisation"',⁹⁷ if read out of context, would seem to belong to the Weberian problematic that arguably strongly influenced Anderson's own concept of the state.⁹⁸

If this is indeed the case, Gramsci's concept would represent no significant departure from Hegel's 'strictly political State and its constitution', comprehended as the middle term, flanked by civil society and the totalising 'ethical' state, of a tripartite division of the social formation. The concept of the integral state would remain besieged by the same contradictions the young Marx found in Hegel's 'actuality of the ethical Idea/strictly political State'. In other words, it would be unable to provide an account of the transition between civil society

⁹³ Anderson 1976a, p. 25.

⁹⁴ Q 6, §65; Q 6, §88; *SPN*, p. 263; both written in the first months of 1931.

⁹⁵ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, p. 253; late 1930.

⁹⁶ Q 8, §130; *SPN*, p. 268; April 1932.

⁹⁷ Q 13, §11; *SPN*, p. 247; written between mid-1932 and early 1934.

⁹⁸ Anderson's argument tends to suggest a non-Marxist concept of the state. The prior Marxist tradition had carefully distinguished between a series of concepts that grasped limited elements of the state, and a definition of the state as such as a political relation between classes. Anderson's implicit concept, however, seems to focus largely on the state as apparatus and locus of juridically and ideologically legitimated violence, and to accord less weight to the relational dimensions of the state. This perspective would seem to have certain affinities with Max Weber's famous definition of the state as 'that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory [...] the State is held to be the sole source of the "right" to use violence' (Weber 1994, pp. 310–11). If it is indeed the case that Anderson's analysis presupposes a model closer to a neo-Kantian definition of the state, it is perhaps not surprising that its application to Gramsci's critically Hegelian concept should end up finding apparent 'antinomies'.

and 'political society or State' in immanent terms. Instead, it would fall back upon 'the idea of a numinous essence of the State, floating majestically above mere juridical or institutional appearances [...] a typically Hegelian heritage',⁹⁹ in order to guarantee the unity of its two subordinate spheres. The relationship between civil and political society would then be conceived according to the model of two parallel and distinct 'emanations' of an incorporeal state. They would be capable of 'communicating' between each other—on the basis of reference to their common ground—but an organic 'translation' between them, without reference to the purported *Ursprache* of the superterrestrial state, would be inconceivable.

Other passages, though, suggest that 'political society' is more properly conceived as including but not limited to the state apparatus. Thus Gramsci argues that the political party, in relation to the intellectuals,

is precisely the mechanism that carries out in civil society the same function that the State carries out on a larger scale in political society. [...] Indeed it can be said that within its field the political party accomplishes its function more completely and organically than the State does within its far larger field [i.e. political society].¹⁰⁰

'State' in this context can be reasonably regarded as referring to the state apparatus, as an actor within political society, which is defined as the terrain of the state apparatus's efficacy. In another passage discussing the relative hegemonic importance of the Pope, Croce and Gentile, he defines the 'structure of civil society' as the 'content of political society'.¹⁰¹ Political society, considered in this sense as the form of a content, thus has an extensive and enduring relationship to the structure of civil society, rather than the sort of relationship that is merely the localised and occasional contact with the structure of civil society of a state apparatus. Equally problematic is Gramsci's full formulation of civil society and political society as 'self-government' and 'government of functionaries'.¹⁰² Immediately prior to these terms, they are described as 'the two forms in which the State is presented in the language and culture of determinate epochs'; soon after, he speaks of

⁹⁹ Anderson 1976a, pp. 39–40.

¹⁰⁰ Q 4, §49; written in November 1930.

¹⁰¹ Q 7, §17; written in late 1930.

¹⁰² Q 8, §130.

the will to construct within the enwrapping [*involucro*] of political Society a complex and well-articulated civil society, in which the individual can govern himself without his self-government thereby entering into conflict with political society, but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic complement.¹⁰³

The definition of political society as an ‘involucro’ in which a civil society can be developed would not seem to correspond in any sense to the concept of the state apparatus; for, whereas the latter is normally conceived as a coercive instrument applied externally in order to regulate civil society’s inherent tendency towards anarchy, Gramsci here presents the image of ‘political Society’ as a ‘container’ of civil society, surrounding or enmeshing and fundamentally reshaping it.¹⁰⁴ Rather than the negation of the rationality of the state, ‘a complex and well-articulated civil society’ in this vision would represent its maximum affirmation, its concrete realisation and ‘truth’.

In fact, ‘political Society’ here refers to something more extensive than an apparatus of institutions; or, rather, it considers those institutions as moments of the ‘universality’ claimed by the ‘political’ in class society. The state apparatus plays an important role in concretising this unifying supplement to civil society’s constitutive divided particularity—but the ‘political’ as such necessarily exceeds the institutions that seek to organise and regulate it, just as, from another direction, civil society necessarily exceeds the political society that attempts to impose meaning upon it. If the political represents the ‘consciousness’ of the supposedly ‘non-political’, or civil society, the state apparatus functions as the moment of ‘self-consciousness’ of the political itself. In both cases, the higher term is dependent upon its ‘object’ in the very moment that it seeks

¹⁰³ Q 8, §130; *SPN*, p. 268; April 1932.

¹⁰⁴ Gramsci may have derived this image from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where Marx speaks of the French state apparatus as ‘this executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its wide-ranging and ingenious state machinery, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million—this terrifying parasitic body which enmeshes the body of French society and chokes all its pores [*dieser fürchterliche Parasitenkörper, der sich wie eine Netzhaut um den Leib der französischen Gesellschaft schlingt und ihr alle Poren verstopft*] sprang up in the time of the absolute monarchy, with the decay of the feudal system which it had helped to hasten’ (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 11, p. 185; trans. modified; cf. *MEW* 8, p. 196). ‘Involucro’ is used in Italian translations to render Marx’s ‘Netzhaut’ (literally: retina, as used in the famous ‘Camera obscura’ image from *The German Ideology* cf. Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 35).

to supersede its limits. For Gramsci, political society in this broader sense is constituted by a class's transition from a merely (economic-) corporative to a properly hegemonic or political phase, in which it posits its own particular interests as valid, or at least capable of providing leadership, for the society as a whole. The history of political society hitherto (a social form that came into being *only* with the modern world) has consisted in its conscious separation from civil society, as the speculative juridical resolution of civil society's contradictions. Under the guise of a translation into 'modern political language' of Machiavelli's notion of the 'Prince'—namely, in the form of the 'political party'—Gramsci indicates at least one possibility for a more coherent transition. In this context, the re-absorption of political society in civil society would constitute the foundation for the emergence of a 'self-regulated society', indicating not merely the relocation of the mechanisms of decision-making and governance from one (minoritarian) sphere to another (majoritarian), but the self-regulation of a society in which economics and politics, the kingdom of necessity and the kingdom of freedom, of external determination and self-determination, are no longer separated. More precisely, it would indicate a civil society that, in the midst of its divisive particularity and subaltern interpellation by the existing political society, assumes consciousness of its own contradictions; but not in order to cancel them in a universality that hovers above it in a political society, the 'constitutional Right, of a traditional type'.¹⁰⁵ Rather, it would seek to mobilise them as mediations in

a system of principles that affirm the end of the State as its own end, its own vanishing, that is, the re-absorption of political society in civil society.¹⁰⁶

5.2.7. 'Attributes' of the integral state

Why, then, does Gramsci maintain the term 'State' as a synonym for 'political Society', while at the same time developing a notion of the state in its integral sense, as the dialectical unity of this 'political society or State' and civil society? As Francioni notes, even after the emergence of the new problematic of the integral state,¹⁰⁷ Gramsci continues to use the term 'State' in contexts where, according to his own logic, the new concept of 'political society'

¹⁰⁵ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, p. 253; written in November–December 1930.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Q 4, §38, written in October 1930.

would be more precise and open the way to less confusion.¹⁰⁸ According to Anderson's argument, these moments were the result of the fact that Gramsci himself, doubly incarcerated in prison and in his own code language, was confused about his terminology, which thus became subject to 'slippages' (as if Gramsci at times forgot his newly introduced distinction and returned to the 'traditional' usage). This resulted, Anderson argued, in a blurring of the boundaries of the state, now nebulously floating between and sometimes encompassing all terms: '(integral) State', 'political society or state' and 'civil society'.¹⁰⁹

The fact that from its first usage, however, Gramsci conjugates political society and state ('which in everyday language is the form of State life to which the term of State is applied and which is commonly understood as the entire State') indicates that the equation was deliberate.¹¹⁰ Rather than being the result of a confusion, the maintenance of the term 'State' for all dimensions (state in an integral sense, as well as state narrowly conceived as an element of 'political society'), was an attempt to specify that the 'identity-distinction between civil society and political society'¹¹¹ occurs 'under the hegemony of the State'.¹¹² It resulted not in a blurring of the boundaries of the state, but in a clearer delineation of the specific efficacy of the bourgeois state as both a social and a political relation—relations organically linked to each other, but which are, nevertheless, usefully distinguished analytically in order to determine their specific intensity and 'mode of production'.

In a first approximation, we could say, adopting a conceptual structure from Spinoza, that Gramsci comprehended 'civil' and 'political society' as two 'attributes' of the 'substance' of the 'integral State'. The former comprehends this substance-state according to the mobilisation of social forces [*Kräfte*] in the

¹⁰⁸ Francioni 1984, p. 195 et sqq.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson argued that 'the *boundaries* of the State are not a matter of indifference to Marxist theory or revolutionary practice' (Anderson 1976a, p. 36). As I have previously suggested, however, the concept of the state as a discrete location in the social formation comes very close to the tenets of at least one liberal tradition. Society is viewed as an agglomeration of sovereign individual wills, out of which, through contractual secession, one will—namely, that of the state—comes to predominate and impose itself upon other wills from the outside. For an insightful reading of Hegel's critique of this 'atomistic conception of the State', cf. Kouvelakis 2003, pp. 28–9.

¹¹⁰ Q 8, § 130; *SPN*, p. 268; April 1932.

¹¹¹ Q 8, § 142.

¹¹² Liguori 2004b, p. 208.

‘ensemble of organisms commonly called “private”’,¹¹³ or in Hegel’s terms, the system of moments of ‘particularity’; the latter term in Gramsci’s couplet comprehends the social whole according to the consolidation of the political power [*Macht*] of a class in statal institutions (that is, according to the degree of coercion, the ‘direct domination’ ‘expressed in the State and in “juridical” government’).¹¹⁴ However, although Gramsci describes them as two super-structural ‘levels’, political society and civil society cannot be assigned equal ‘weight’ in the social formation—their equilibrium, like that of consent and coercion, is a stable disequilibrium. One ‘level’ predominates or ‘superimposes’ itself over the other, in accordance with Gramsci’s three-dimensional image. Co-ordination of social forces in civil society occurs predominantly by what appear to be consensual means; but insofar as the space of the ‘private’ can only be established juridically,¹¹⁵ it presupposes the prior intervention of the political power of the state, as the moment of ‘universality’ that is the condition of possibility of the particular. As its ‘enwrapping [*involucro*]’, political society here appears as the form of the content of civil society, which is necessarily simultaneously different from and identical with it. ‘The State’, as Anderson demanded, ‘enters twice’.¹¹⁶

Drawing upon another conceptual figure of Spinoza, we could thus say in a second approximation that these two ‘attributes’ of the integral state

¹¹³ Q 8, §142.

¹¹⁴ Q 12, §1. English permits no easy differentiation between different modalities of what can thus only be generically presented as ‘power’. I have therefore chosen to use two important concepts from Marx’s and Engels’s vocabulary—force [*Kraft*] and power [*Macht*—in order to distinguish between the related but different ways in which a unitary socio-political power is exercised in civil society and political society respectively. In broad terms, this distinction corresponds to that between *potestas* and *potentia* that Negri argues, not unproblematically, defines Spinoza’s problematic. Cf. Negri 1991.

¹¹⁵ As Althusser correctly noted in his appropriation of Gramsci’s integral concept of the state in order to formulate his notion of ‘ideological state apparatuses’: ‘But someone is bound [to ask] by what right I regard as Ideological State Apparatuses institutions which for the most part do not possess public status, but are quite simply *private* institutions. As a conscious Marxist, Gramsci already forestalled this objection in one sentence. The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its “authority”. The domain of the State escapes it because the latter is “above the law”: the State, which is the State of the ruling class, is neither public nor private; on the contrary, it is the precondition for any distinction between public and private’ (Althusser 1971a, p. 144).

¹¹⁶ Anderson 1977, p. 32.

are not two equally valid, because essentially incommensurable, ways of comprehending the social formation in its totality; one integrates the other and explains it as its constitutive moment. Just as Spinoza's proposition that 'mind is the idea of the body'¹¹⁷—that is, it is the idea of the body that constitutes the mind, rather than the mind giving rise to the body, or mind and body existing as two parallel orders—establishes an order between the two nevertheless distinct attributes, so Gramsci assigns priority to one of the terms.¹¹⁸ Political society is the 'idea' of civil society, the mind of civil society's 'body'; power in political society is a particular 'condensation', to use a term of Poulantzas, or institutional organisation of the social forces in civil society.¹¹⁹ In this sense, Gramsci breaks with the parallelism that results from Hegel's failure to provide an account of the immanent transition between civil society and the 'strictly political State'. Instead, Gramsci follows Marx by seeing civil society as the true ground of the state, which must now be explained on the basis of the specificity of its transformation of the social forces of civil society into its own forms of political power, rather than posited as the necessary and only truth of those social forces. At the same time, however, also following Marx, Gramsci acknowledges that, in bourgeois society, the state really is primary, in the sense that it is a real abstraction or hypostatisation that subordinates and organises a civil society that, 'enwrapped' by the existing political society, can only figure as its subaltern 'raw material'.¹²⁰ The state will remain the 'truth' of civil society until the latter becomes aware of its own 'secret': its capacity for self-organisation and self-regulation. Thus the need for the subaltern classes to become 'more political', which in itself represents the 'spirit of cleavage'¹²¹ that is the precondition for the re-absorption of the political within the social.¹²²

¹¹⁷ EIIP15.

¹¹⁸ On this theme in Spinoza's thought and a critique of the 'Leibnizian' deformations to which it has been subjected ('parallelism', 'pre-established harmony'), cf. Balibar 1998, p. 100 and Montag 1999. For an alternative reading of Spinoza on this point that takes its distance from Deleuze's attempted 'materialist' interpretation, cf. Hallward 2006, pp. 178–9.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Section 6.2.2.

¹²⁰ Cf. Q 25 §5; *SPN*, p. 52; cf. also Q 3, §90.

¹²¹ Q 25 §5; *SPN*, p. 52.

¹²² Gramsci derived the notion of cleavage [*scissione*] from Sorel. For a reading on these themes, cf. Tosel 1991.

5.2.8. The 'location' of hegemony

We can now see why any attempt to 'locate' hegemony in only one of the social forms or 'superstructural "levels"' of the integral state necessarily leads into irresolvable antinomies. Just as political society and civil society are not conceived in a spatial but a functional sense, so hegemony is conceived as a practice 'traversing' the boundaries between them. More accurately, hegemony is a particular practice of consolidating social forces and condensing them into political power on a mass basis—the mode of production of the modern 'political'. Gramsci leaves no doubt that the exercise of hegemony, initially elaborated within civil society, also impacts upon that other superstructural 'level' of the integral state, 'political society or State'. It must necessarily, because political society itself and the power concentrated in it are integrally related to civil society and its social forces, as their mediated, 'higher' forms. A bid for 'civil hegemony' has to progress towards 'political hegemony' in order to maintain itself as itself. Insofar as civil hegemony involves giving coordination, regulation, leadership and direction to social forces in civil society, it presents an immediate challenge to the attempt by political society—in other words, the existing political hegemony, which was itself once civil hegemony—to 'enmesh' the same. Hegemony is therefore always-already, even if only implicitly, political; or, in other words, hegemony in civil society is necessarily comprehended in political society and overdetermined by it. There thus must be an attempt to forge 'political hegemony' also *before* seizing state power or domination in political society¹²³—for, without such an attempt to transform leadership in civil society into a political hegemony or into the nascent forms of a new political society, civil hegemony itself will be disaggregated and subordinated to the existing 'idea' of the social 'body', that is, the existing political hegemony of the ruling class.¹²⁴

Far from lacking a theory of politics, as so many critics spell-bound by the apparent immediately given 'autonomy' of the political have claimed, Gramsci here presents the concept of hegemony as a Marxist theory of 'the constitution

¹²³ Q 1, §44.

¹²⁴ Cf. Q 25, §5.

of the political',¹²⁵ as the process by means of which social forces are integrated into the political power of an existing state—and as the path along which the subaltern classes must learn to travel in a very different way in order to found their own 'non-state state'.

¹²⁵ Gramsci's emphasis upon the constitution (both material and formal) of 'the political' distinguishes his political thought from that of many other philosophers, both Marxist and non-Marxist. I have explored this theme in relation to contemporary theories of 'the political' in Thomas 2009.

Chapter Six

‘The Realisation of Hegemony’

The assumptions examined in the previous chapter concerned the conceptual determination of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. In this chapter, we will confront assumptions that are equally theoretical, but of a different order. The first two assumptions (regarding the relation of coercion and consent in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and the terrain of its efficacy) involved the reduction of Gramsci's thought to well known motifs drawn from the most venerable traditions in the history of Western political philosophy; they thereby distanced Gramsci from the political debates of the international workers' movement in the 1920s and 1930s to which his concepts were a direct response. The final two assumptions (regarding Gramscian hegemony's geopolitical determination and class basis) take one step forward in order to go two steps backwards. That is, these assumptions, more historical than conceptual in nature, assimilate Gramsci to one or another of the conflicting tendencies of the early years of the Third International. As we will see, Gramsci's thought is only properly comprehended when it is placed in this context, amid the cut and thrust of debates that sealed the fate of revolutionary Marxism in the twentieth century. However, the positions proposed by Gramsci cannot be reduced to

one or another of those currents that subsequently won (or were spectacularly defeated) in this decisive theoretico-political conjuncture. Rather, Gramsci proposes positions that are properly seen as a distinctive contribution to these debates, or as attempts to find a dialectical 'third path' beyond the antinomies into which the socialist imagination was then falling. The actuality of Gramsci's thought today lies precisely in the extent to which his proposals remain solitary—including in our own time.

6.1. West versus East

The third assumption further extends the consent-civil society/coercion-state binary opposition, in order to characterise two qualitatively distinct geographical zones of West and East. According to this reading, Gramsci regarded the former as the zone of consensual hegemony in civil society; the latter, following a variation of the thesis of Oriental despotism, is then presented as fated to a coercive dictatorship (of Tsarist absolutism, of the proletariat) of the state. War of position is the appropriate strategy for overcoming the solidified institutional structures of the former, while the latter, at least at the time of the Russian Revolution, was still susceptible to the frontal assault of the 'classical' war of manoeuvre. Support for this position is drawn from one of the most famous aphorisms of the *Prison Notebooks*.

In the East, the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relationship between State and civil society.¹

The 'powerful system of fortresses and earthworks' in the West therefore called for a qualitatively different revolutionary strategy.² In the *Prison Notebooks*, with the concept of hegemony, Gramsci aimed to become its theorist.

'The theorist of revolution in the West' has long constituted one of the most pervasive 'images of Gramsci'. The political benefits of this reading are obvious: in different conjunctures in which the legacy of the Russian Revolution has

¹ Q 7, § 16; SPN, p. 238; written in November–December 1930.

² Ibid.

been contested or condemned, it has allowed different interpreters to present the author of the *Prison Notebooks*, participant in some of the most vital debates of the early Third International, as untainted by the Soviet experience and particularly its Stalinist degeneration (implicitly or explicitly asserted to be the *telos* or truth of Bolshevism). Thus, the deployment of this image in the early Italian reception coincided with the PCI's 'cool distancing' from Moscow, increasingly in the wake of 1956 and the elaboration of an 'Italian road to socialism' (and later, Eurocommunism). Similarly, as generations of Western leftists from the 1960s onwards sought to extricate themselves from the complexity of debates surrounding October's aftermath and focus upon what were taken to be the tasks of a very different time and place, this particular Gramsci seemed to provide both a more 'honourable' connection to the classical-Marxist tradition and the rudiments of a more democratic 'Western Marxism'. Undoubtedly, in the conjuncture following 1989 and still to some extent today, when Marxism *tout court* is not infrequently condemned as Oriental despotism, this image has contributed not a little to Gramsci's 'actuality'. Arguably, Gramsci is today a more popular theorist in mainstream academic debates than any other thinker from the Marxist tradition, Marx and Engels themselves not excluded.

6.1.1. Predominance as weakness

Nevertheless, several caveats should be entered. First, Gramsci's declaration that 'in the East, the State was everything' has often been taken to imply the *strength* of the state in the East and, consequently, a comparative *weakness* of the state (overpowered by the *strength* of civil society) in the West. Yet, on closer inspection of Gramsci's formulation, it is precisely the state's overwhelming 'pyrrhic predominance' in the East that turns out, to have been a weakness, when compared to the 'proper relationship between state and civil society' that obtained in the West. In the East, the state lacked the complex of defensive trenches that a developed and articulated civil society could provide to the state in the West, and which helped to 'resist' the immediate irruption of conflicts in the world of production into the political terrain. As Paggi argues, following Lenin and Trotsky,

the Tsarist State, centralised and absolutist, excluding from participation in power not only the popular masses but also the vast majority of the intermediate strata of society, was deprived, in the decisive moment, of its primary reserves.³

In this sense, Gramsci's admittedly rhetorically exaggerated formulation is a restatement of Lenin's thesis that it had been easier to seize state power in the East first precisely because of the weakness of development of the state (in its integral sense). Revolution in the West, on the other hand, confronted by a more robustly developed state-form that included, decisively, the rich articulations and mediations of a mature civil society, would require a longer and more complex process of preparation and prosecution. The 'everything' of the state in the East, i.e. political society, itself underdeveloped and largely limited to a state-apparatus, turns out to have been 'abstract', an emptiness lacking in concrete mediations; when confronted by the fullness of the dialectical implication of civil and political society in the West, it recognises its own paucity.

6.1.2. The 'underdeveloped' West

Second, although Gramsci emphasises on numerous occasions the robustness of civil society in the West in general, his analyses of specific Western social formations give evidence that it was not only in the Orient that civil society was 'underdeveloped'. Famously, Gramsci asked in early 1930 whether 'the model of American industrialism'—that is, Fordism—could determine a new phase in industrialism in Europe.⁴ Yet, at the same time, Gramsci detected the absence of many of the institutions of civil society in the most 'Western' part of the West in comparison to the more elaborated networks of continental Europe.

Americanism, in its most developed form, requires a preliminary condition: 'the rationalisation of the population', that is, that there shouldn't exist numerous classes with no essential function in the world of production,

³ Paggi 1984, p. 14.

⁴ *Q* 1, §61.

in other words, absolutely parasitical classes. The European 'tradition', is conversely characterised precisely by the existence of such classes, created by these social elements: Statal administration, clergy and intellectuals, landed property, commerce.⁵

Of course, this relative 'weakness' of civil society in the United States in fact turns out to be a political strength for the 'plutocratic concentration' of the American industrialists. In Europe, with its 'traditions of culture', a class's hegemonic project needed to traverse the mediations of the institutions of civil society (whether parasitic or more 'productive' institutions) in order to 'saturate' the social whole. In the USA, on the other hand, industrialists like Ford were able to exert their programme of 'rationalisation' over the entire society on the basis of their dominance in the world of production, 'in order to base the entire life of the country on the basis of industry'.⁶ Thus Gramsci could argue, in a passage often read out of context, that in America 'hegemony is born in the factory and doesn't need many political and ideological intermediaries'.⁷ The question here is not posed in terms of East versus West, but rather as one of differential times, cultural and political traditions and political forms within the West itself.

6.1.3. The absent centre of the West

Third, and most significantly, Gramsci's historical analyses also detect a weakness of civil society in the Western-European heartland itself, in a context that demonstrates the fundamentally historical rather than geopolitical presuppositions of his analysis of the state. Gramsci argues that, in a specific conjuncture, Italy itself, seemingly a paradigmatic instance of a social formation at the antipodes of the Russian experience, was characterised by an 'underdeveloped' civil society—underdeveloped, that is, in comparison with the 'paradigm' of political modernity that had emerged from the French Revolution. In France, the Jacobins

⁵ Q 1, §61; cf. Q 6, §10; *SPN*, pp. 270–2; Q 8, §185; *SPN*, pp. 263–4.

⁶ Q 1, §61.

⁷ *Ibid.*

not only founded the bourgeois State, making the bourgeoisie the ‘dominant’ class, but they did more (in a certain sense), making the bourgeoisie the leading class, hegemon, that is, they gave the State a permanent basis.⁸

In Italy, on the other hand, ‘in the *Partito d’Azione* we don’t find this Jacobin spirit, this will to become the “leading party”’.⁹ They were unable, in the *involucro* of the newly founded post-*Risorgimento* Italian state, to elaborate a new, genuinely modern, civil society as the necessary complement of the state’s rationalising programme. They had not been able, that is, to develop that ‘proper relationship between State and civil society’ that Gramsci argues is characteristic of a ‘fully Western’ West.¹⁰ Traces of the past—the parasitism Gramsci argued was lacking in the North-American formation—remained all too effective, preventing Italian civil society from playing its properly political role in providing a social basis and content to political society.

This does not, it should be emphasised, represent a case of Italian exceptionalism; rather, it is France, in its hegemonic role as the most ‘complete’ of modern bourgeois revolutions, that represents the exception to which all other European states, to differing degrees, are the rule. In a specific sense, Italy, along with much of Western Europe, had experienced a ‘belated’ modernity not qualitatively dissimilar from that which preceded the Russian Revolution, under the aegis of what Alberto Burgio has described as ‘a type of ‘mixed constitution’, partly modern (bourgeois), partly premodern (feudal-aristocratic)’.¹¹ As Burgio argues,

while in France the birth of the bourgeois State brings about a *decisive historical caesura*, a drastic and ‘immediate’ transition, in the rest of Europe the process of constitution of the modern world is marked by a *strong continuity* with respect to the past. [...] Differently than in France, in the rest of Europe there is not the liquidation but a *gradual metamorphosis* of the *ancien régime*, its metabolisation in the political-institutional sphere of the new states and in the very body of the emerging bourgeois society.¹²

⁸ Q 1, §44.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 238.

¹¹ Burgio 2002, p. 64.

¹² Burgio 2002, p. 62.

It is not the 'ideal-type' of the West that figures here as the homeland of civil society. Rather, the modern bourgeois state in its most articulated form (including a developed civil society), as the form most adequate to the bourgeoisie's class project and re-organisation of the world of production, provides an immanent criterion by which to assess developments in other social formations that have not yet achieved such a 'proper relationship' between civil and political society.

Gramsci does not posit, therefore, the mere juxtaposition of East and West, but, rather, a complex dialectic between the hegemonic centre of any given historical period and the peripheral zones that are produced as such by its leading historical role. Rather than a geopolitical division of the globe into qualitatively different historical times, the *Prison Notebooks* propose the much more difficult task of measuring the interpellation by a 'potential future in the present' of the 'pasts in the present'; that is, the dominance by one particular present social formation of other social formations, a dominant present that threatens to become, at varying degrees of mediation and in more or less pure forms, the future of the others. Against all stageism, Gramsci proposes that it is the historically more 'advanced' centres that allow us to understand the 'delayed' developments in their peripheries. West and East are comparable, just as variations in the West itself, because both participate in the dynamic of an expansive political and economic order that is fundamentally and essentially internationalist in character.¹³

6.1.4. Antinomies of East and West

'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', however, not only continued the traditional 'Occidentalist' image but intensified it, in a certain sense, drawing its logical conclusions. As we have seen, Anderson regarded the East-West distinction as the foundation of Gramsci's entire carceral project. More than any other 'classical' Marxist, he had attempted to register the specificity of the Western social formations and their democratic-liberal parliamentary systems. Against the popularised image, Anderson stressed that Gramsci had not been

¹³ For a treatment of the political overdeterminations of Gramsci's metaphor, cf. Tosel 1988.

alone in focusing on the West's differences from the East, as 'the essential terms of [his] theoretical universe'.¹⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the October revolution, there were many socialists in Central and Western Europe who sensed that the local conditions in which they had to fight were far from those which had obtained in Russia, and who initially said so.¹⁵

Anderson nominated Lukács and Gorter as representatives of this current, soon eclipsed by Soviet nationalism under Stalin; in a second moment, he signalled Bordiga as the figure who had solved the 'riddle' Gramsci had only been able to pose but not resolve.¹⁶ The most prominent proponents of a dialectical distinction between East and West, however, as Anderson briefly

¹⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 7.

¹⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 50.

¹⁶ In 1974, Anderson had argued that Gramsci had detected but had not been able to solve the Sphinx's riddle of the 'West' (cf. Anderson 1974b, p. 359). By the time of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' in 1976, however, he had located the outlines of a possible solution: Amadeo Bordiga's critique of parliamentarianism. 'Strangely, in the tormented decade of the twenties, it was not Gramsci but his comrade and antagonist Amadeo Bordiga who was to formulate the true nature of the distinction between East and West, although he never theorized it into any cogent political practice' (Anderson 1976a, p. 52). Anderson argued that Bordiga's intervention at the Sixth Plenum of the Executive of the Comintern in 1926 indicated a more exact awareness of the specificity of the Western capitalist state, founded upon a greater degree of consent and a simultaneously greater coercive capacity than had been available to the Tsarist régime. The less than robust nature of the thesis can be observed in two factors. First, after having praised Bordiga's accuracy in analysing the distinction between state-forms in East and West, Anderson promptly goes on to invoke Trotsky, architect of the united front and theorist of permanent revolution, as guide to the tasks of proletarian revolution in the West. Despite the similar tenor of Bordiga's and Trotsky's critique of Stalin, Bordiga's early rallying to the Left Opposition (though followed by subsequent break), and affinities between Bordiga's later analysis of the USSR as an 'incipient capitalism' with certain (post-) Trotskyist state-capitalist analyses (themselves always firmly rejected by Anderson, including in 'Antinomies' (Anderson 1976a, p. 35)), there is a strict incompatibility between the residual historicist stageism of Bordiga's understanding of the form of proletarian revolution and Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. This discrepancy of theoretical models becomes even more obvious when Anderson attempts to combine the Bordigist thesis of Eastern specificity with a vague advocacy of the united front. In all of its most significant formulations (Trotsky's, Lenin's, and that which Gramsci ascribed to Lenin), the united front, as an internationally valid strategy of proletarian agitation, assumes the *contemporaneity* of all state-forms within the same world system (which, of course, is something quite distinct from asserting their formal identity). On Bordiga's political thought, cf. de Clementi 1971, Livorsi 1976 and Goldner

noted,¹⁷ were Lenin and Trotsky.¹⁸ Both had begun to formulate this position well before the disastrous *Teilaktionen* that led to the defeat of the German Revolution. Lenin's 'Report on War and Peace', for instance, dating from 7 March 1918 but only published in 1923, contains the following formulations.

The revolution will not come as quickly as we expected. History has proved this, and we must be able to take this as a fact, to reckon with the fact that the world socialist revolution cannot begin so easily in the advanced countries as the revolution began in Russia—in the land of Nicholas and Rasputin, the land in which an enormous part of the population was absolutely indifferent as to what peoples were living in the outlying regions, or what was happening there. In such a country it was quite easy to start a revolution, as easy as lifting a feather. But to start without preparation a revolution in a country in which capitalism is developed and has given democratic culture and organization to everybody, down to the last man—to do so would be wrong, absurd.¹⁹

Furthermore, as Rosengarten notes in one of the most extended considerations of these themes,

there is reason to believe that the seed of an idea that was to germinate in Gramsci's mind in 1923 and 1924, and come to full fruition in his reflections in the *Prison Notebooks*—the idea that the conquest of power by the proletariat in the countries of Western Europe would require a strategy significantly different from the one followed by the Russian Bolsheviks—was due not only

1991. For an analysis of Bordiga's later views in a comparative perspective, cf. van der Linden 2007, pp. 122–6. Second, as Bordiga himself emphasised at the 1926 meeting, there was a fundamental continuity between the position he now adopted against 'Bolshevisation' and the 'intransigent' position he had taken in the earlier debates over the united front, from the Second Congress of the International onwards (cf. Kommunistische Internationale 1926, pp. 122–44, p. 124 in particular)—for which he had been soundly rebuked by Lenin. (cf. Riddell (ed.) 1992, p. 459. cf. also Bambery 2007, p. 101). In truth, the notion of an 'organic' distinction between *political* forms in East and West was not a discovery of Bordiga, but a commonplace of much post-Enlightenment bourgeois thought; in the workers' movement, it played a decisive role in Kautsky's post-1905 rejection of the possibility that the Russian revolution could ever lay the foundation for anything more than Oriental despotism (cf. Salvadori 1979, pp. 35 et sqq. in particular).

¹⁷ Anderson 1976a, pp. 58–9.

¹⁸ Cf. Rosengarten 1984–5, pp. 66–7.

¹⁹ Lenin 1964, Volume 27, pp. 98–9.

to the teachings of Lenin, but in some measure also to the various speeches and writings Trotsky devoted to aspects of the Italian situation in 1921 and 1922.²⁰

Particularly important in this regard is Trotsky's 'Report on the New Soviet Economic Policy and the Perspectives of the World Revolution' of 14 November 1922 at the Fourth Congress. Gramsci explicitly referred to this intervention while theorising the different roles of civil society on the 'Eastern' and 'Western' fronts a decade later.²¹ For Trotsky,

The explanation must be sought in the cultural and political backwardness of a country that had just cast off Czarist barbarism. [...] it was only after the bourgeoisie began to grasp fully what it had lost by losing political power, and only after it had set in motion its counter-revolutionary combat nucleus. [...] As a result, the Civil War unfolded fully only after the October overturn. The ease with which we conquered power on November 7, 1917, was paid for by the countless sacrifices of the Civil War. In countries that are older in the capitalist sense, and with a higher culture, the situation will, without doubt, differ profoundly. In these countries the popular masses will enter the revolution far more fully formed in political respects. To be sure, the orientation of individual layers and groups among the proletariat, and all the more so among the petit-bourgeoisie, will still continue to fluctuate violently and change but, nevertheless, these changes will occur far more systemati-

²⁰ Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 78.

²¹ 'An attempt to begin a revision of tactical methods was supposed to have been the one expounded by L. Davidovic Bronstein at the Fourth Congress when he made a comparison between the Eastern Front and the Western Front; the former fell immediately but was followed by tremendous struggles; in the latter the struggles would take place "first". It would be a question, that is, of whether the civil society resists before or after the assault, where this occurs etc. The question, however, was posed only in a brilliant, literary form, but without indications of a practical character' (Q 13, §24; *SPN*, p. 236; cf. Trotsky 1974, pp. 220–2). As Rosengarten notes, this highly overdetermined text is a prime example of the 'grudging and half-disparaging manner that characterizes most of [Gramsci's] references to Trotsky in the *Notebooks*' (Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 79), for 'contingent' reasons we will soon examine. In reality, despite Gramsci's emotionally charged personal reaction to Trotsky, the terms of their analyses are remarkably similar and complementary, in a fitting sense: while Trotsky provides a more detailed analysis of the weakness implicit in the state's omnipotence in the East (as both apparatus and 'political society'), Gramsci's concepts of 'civil society' and 'hegemonic apparatus' provide a more sophisticated theoretical paradigm for grasping the implications for revolutionary strategy of what Trotsky described as the 'heaviest reserves' of the bourgeoisie in the West.

cally than in our country; the present will flow much more directly out of the past. The bourgeoisie in the West is preparing its counter-blow in advance. [...] what does this mean? This means it will hardly be possible to catch the European bourgeoisie by surprise as we caught the Russian bourgeoisie. The European bourgeoisie is more intelligent, and more farsighted; it is not wasting time. Everything that can be set on foot against us is being mobilized by it right now. The revolutionary proletariat will thus encounter on its road to power not only the combat vanguards of the counter-revolution but also its heaviest reserves. Only by smashing, breaking up and demoralizing these enemy forces will the proletariat be able to seize power. But by way of compensation, after the proletarian overturn the vanquished bourgeoisie will no longer dispose of powerful reserves from which it could draw forces for prolonging the Civil War. In other words, after the conquest of power, the European proletariat will in all likelihood have far more elbowroom for its creative work in economy and culture than we had in Russia on the day after the overturn. The more difficult and gruelling the struggle for state power, all the less possible will it be to challenge the proletariat's power after the victory.²²

Lenin and Trotsky opposed the theory of the 'revolutionary offensive' in an act of immanent critique: that is, they acknowledged the important differences between East and West, and, precisely on this basis, counselled against any mechanical attempt to 'repeat'—or, rather, to engage in a farcical mimicry of—the Bolshevik strategy in the West. In a period of 'unstable equilibrium' on the international stage, it was necessary to adopt the strategy of the 'united front'. This involved, but was not limited to, a tactical collaboration with Social-Democratic forces; more important, and the *raison d'être* for such collaboration, was the goal of building the largest possible mass base of proletarian class forces.²³

Responding directly to the Italian delegation at the Third Congress of the International, Lenin argued that

²² Trotsky 1974, pp. 220–2.

²³ Paggi argues that the idea that the united front was primarily 'an instrument of struggle against Social Democracy' (Paggi 1984, p. 4) only developed later, from 1924 onwards, a first step in the deformation of the political vision informing the united front that would eventually culminate in the thesis of 'social fascism'—the theoretical and organisational negation of Lenin's insistence on the need for mass support of any genuinely revolutionary politics.

in Europe, where almost all the proletarians are organised, we must win the majority of the working class and anyone who fails to understand this is lost to the Communist movement; he will never learn anything if he has failed to learn that much during the three years of the great revolution.²⁴

At the same time, he insisted upon the generally valid elements from the Russian experience, rejecting any mechanical and caricatured interpretation of it as an immediate assault. Lenin argued that

Terracini says that we were victorious in Russian although the Party was very small [...]. Comrade Terracini has understood very little of the Russian Revolution. In Russia, we were a small party, but we had with us in addition the majority of the Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies throughout the country [...]. Do you have anything of the sort? We had with us almost half the army, which then numbered at least ten million men. Do you really have the majority of the army behind you?²⁵

What was required was an adequate 'translation' (as Gramsci later came to call it) of the Russian experience into the vernaculars and concrete conditions of the still prerevolutionary Western social formations.²⁶ Fundamentally, this translation consisted in winning the majority of the subaltern classes to the hegemony of the proletariat, as the social base that would permit communism in the West to 'speak'.

For Anderson, Gramsci's true distinctiveness consisted in the fact that he

was unique among Communists in persisting, at the nadir of the defeats of the thirties, to see that Russian experience could not be merely repeated in the West, and in trying to understand why. No other thinker in the European working-class movement has to this day addressed himself so deeply or centrally to the problem of the specificity of a socialist revolution in the West.²⁷

However, Gramsci's mistake lay in not developing this fertile intuition far enough; for he ultimately did not register the extent to which the difference between East and West was a qualitative one, a difference of type and not

²⁴ Lenin 1964, Volume 32, p. 470.

²⁵ Lenin 1964, Volume 32, p. 470–1.

²⁶ Cf. Section 6.2.7.

²⁷ Anderson 1976a, p. 50.

merely degree of development. East and West inhabited entirely different temporalities, so as to make their relations less contradictory or contested than incompatible. The fundamental historical differences of East and West, producing divergent presents, permitted no easy translation, if at all, of Oriental answers for the resolution of Occidental problems, which had never been confronted by the Bolsheviks and the Russian revolutionary experience.

While 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' thus challenged the common-sensical reading of the novelty of Gramsci's East-West formulations, it nevertheless ultimately confirmed the image of Gramsci as a fundamentally Western theorist, in a certain sense discontinuous with the Bolshevik experience. His concept of *egemonia* could then be presented as an attempted theorisation of the foundations of bourgeois power in the Occident, qualitatively distinct from the concept of *gegemoniya* as a weapon of proletarian struggle in the East. Nevertheless, 'Antinomies' also mustered enough evidence to suggest that Gramsci's geographical formulations should be read in a slightly different optic. As Anderson recognised, the notion that there were different state-forms in East and West that consequently required different revolutionary strategies had been a commonplace in the early debates of the Comintern. It was precisely against such abstract exaggerations of difference that Lenin and Trotsky, as we have seen, had struggled to establish a more dialectical appreciation of the important differences and simultaneous affinities between East and West, viewed from the perspective of a proletarian seizure of state power. The Latin 'leftists'—including the Spanish and French delegations to the Comintern, but, above all, Terracini, Bordiga and the leadership of the Italian Communist Party—on the other hand, argued for 'national exceptionalism'. Consequently, they rejected the policy of the united front, with disastrous results; the failure to comprehend the 'last' Lenin's advice fully at the right moment made it all the more difficult to struggle effectively against the ascent to power of Fascist counter-revolution.

Anderson suggested that

from 1921 to 1924, the years when the Comintern seriously tried to secure the implementation of United Front tactics towards the PSI Maximalists in Italy, both Bordiga and Gramsci refused and resisted the line of the International. By the time Gramsci had assumed the leadership of the party in 1924, and rallied to a policy of fidelity to the International, Fascism was

already installed and the Comintern—now radically changed in character—had largely abandoned United Front tactics itself.²⁸

Gramsci's reference to the united front in the *Prison Notebooks*, according to this perspective, therefore did not represent 'a renewal of [Gramsci's] political past: on the contrary, it marks a conscious retrospective break with it',²⁹ perhaps even a form of penance for youthful ultra-leftist excesses. Its significance was that it demonstrated that Gramsci had finally, belatedly, come to understand the true distinctiveness of the West, which he now proposed to investigate in concrete terms that were qualitatively different from those required for analysis of the situation in the East.

In truth, the reference to the united front in the *Prison Notebooks*, as we shall see, is less a break than a fundamental deepening and elaboration of the decisive experience of Gramsci's political maturity. As Buci-Glucksmann, Paggi and Rosengarten have argued, Gramsci's break with Bordiga, under the influence of direct contact with the Russian leadership (in polemic, in particular, with Trotsky) and Soviet society from May 1922 to December 1923, came somewhat earlier, perhaps during the Fourth Congress itself or at the latest before his sojourn in Vienna (December 1923–May 1924).³⁰ Paggi argues that

by means of participation in the labours of this international meeting, Gramsci was in fact able to embrace, for the first time, the meaning and the profound implications of the political turn whose most resolved interpreter since the preceding conference had been the leading Russian group, and which now found its definitive sanction in the full and unconditional acceptance of the slogan of the united front.³¹

²⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 59.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ It is true that Gramsci did demonstrate resistance to the politics of the united front at the beginning of the Fourth Congress; but he did so precisely because he disagreed with Trotsky regarding the concrete meaning of this perspective in the contemporary Italian conjuncture. On 15 November 1922, in a tense confrontation with the Italian delegation, Trotsky demanded immediate fusion with the maximalists of the Italian Socialist Party (who earlier had entered into a non-aggression pact with the Fascists). Gramsci argued that the socialists were not a workers' party at all but a peasant-based petty-bourgeois party; fusion with them would make a genuine broad class-based politics, such as those of the united front, more difficult. On this debate, cf. Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 76.

³¹ Paggi 1984, p. 3. Paggi (1984, p. 22) dates the first document that testifies to

For Buci-Glucksmann,

the Moscow of the NEP, close after the debates of the Tenth Congress [of the Russian Party] on the relationship between economics and politics, and the place of the trade unions in the proletarian dictatorship, the Moscow of the Fourth Congress of the International (still presided over by Lenin, even if he was already ill), which Gramsci attended, was to confirm his belief in the need to wage a major battle in Italy against the Bordiga leadership and for the realization of the united front strategy.³²

Finally, according to Rosengarten,

the year 1923 marked a turning point in Gramsci's career [...] he had accepted [the basic rationale of united-front tactics] and begun to expound [it] in his own party by March 1923.³³

Gramsci's acceptance of the united front to May 1923: 'the tactic of the united front outlined with enough precision by the Russian comrades both technically and in the general approach to its practical application, hasn't found a party and men *in any country* who know how to concretise it. [...] There is something that doesn't work on the entire international field and there is a weakness and a deficiency of leadership. The Italian question has to be seen in this context, not as something that depends on the bad faith of individuals and that can be modified by the good will of the first rough fellow who wants to play the Marcellus' (Gramsci 1978, p. 155). Against the current, in unpropitious circumstances and, crucially, with an conception of the nature of the united front different from the conception which certain currents in the Comintern were seeking to 'impose' from above, Gramsci was already working to realise the significance of the united front, both in Italy and in the international movement as a whole.

³² Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 186.

³³ Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 76. Rosengarten focuses in particular on Gramsci's letter to the Italian party of 12 September 1923, in which he outlined the project for the newspaper that would become *L'Unità*. Cf. Gramsci 1978, pp. 161–3. The following formulation from *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* succinctly formulates the position Gramsci had been pursuing for over two years and shows that his views developed from the debates of the Fourth Congress rather than their later Fifth Congress deformation: 'The proletariat, in order to become capable as a class of governing, must strip itself of every residue of corporatism, every syndicalist prejudice and incrustation. What does this mean? That, in addition to the need to overcome the distinctions which exist between one trade and another, it is necessary—in order to win the trust and consent of the peasants and of some semi-proletarian urban categories—to overcome certain prejudices and conquer certain forms of egoism which can and do subsist within the working class as such, even when craft particularism has disappeared. The metalworker, the joiner, the building-worker, etc., must not only think as proletarians, and no longer as metal-worker, joiner, building-worker, etc.; they must also take a further step. They must think as workers who are members of a class which aims to lead the peasants and intellectuals; members of a class which can win and build socialism only if it is aided and followed by the great majority of these social strata. If this is not achieved,

It was a break as definitive as it was significant, for it set him on a path to elaborate a coherent 'internationalist' perspective on the Italian situation, without neglecting its specific conditions, which he pursued in practical and theoretical terms right up until his imprisonment. Lenin's advice on the need to win over the majority of the working class (understood in the broadest sense) as the *sine qua non* of revolutionary politics, whether in East or West, before or after a successful assault on bourgeois state power, became Gramsci's fundamental orientation.

In the *Prison Notebooks*, there is an essential continuity with this perspective: rather than a simple juxtaposition between East and West, Gramsci acknowledges a deeper unity-in-difference regarding the revolutionary strategies appropriate to each of them, founded upon the fundamental unity of the capitalist state-form and the necessity for a proletarian united front to oppose it. Against the popular image, it is necessary to stress this consciously international scope of Gramsci's theory, which comprehended the difference between these social formations and their state-forms as one of degree, not of type.³⁴ As Paggi argues,

Gramsci's theoretical effort in the years of suffering and of solitude is that [...] of thinking the way in which the revolutionary process opened by October can go forward in a changed frame of reference, both in the East and the West.³⁵

Gramsci's gambit in the *Prison Notebooks* was to turn the foundational political strategy of the Russian revolutionary experience—to wit, the concept and practice of hegemony—into an 'historical-political criterion',³⁶ or 'canon of historical research',³⁷ for study of the specificity of the Western social formations. The real meaning of this specificity (or rather, specificities) only becomes clear

the proletariat does not become the leading class; and these strata (which in Italy represent the majority of the population), remaining under bourgeois leadership, enable the State to resist the proletarian assault and wear it down' (Gramsci 1978, pp. 448–9).

³⁴ Gramsci explicitly repudiates any geopolitical dualism, particularly those invoking differential 'historical determinism', in a letter to Togliatti from Vienna in early 1924; cf. Gramsci 1978, pp. 199–200.

³⁵ Paggi 1984, p. 381; cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 5; Rosengarten 1984–5, pp. 65–7.

³⁶ *Q* 1, §44.

³⁷ *Q* 3, §90.

when it is placed in this expanded optic, as an exception (or rather, exceptions) proving the rule. Rather than the *Sonderweg* of the early twenties, the 'Italian case' in the *Prison Notebooks* now figures only as a 'prominent' and immediately strategically pressing 'example of this more general enquiry'.³⁸

6.1.5. The international capitalist state-form

The perspective is most clearly formulated in a famous note from the special notebook on Machiavelli, written in February 1933. This note has often been invoked to illustrate Gramsci's critique of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution (and sometimes used to suggest his closer affinity to Stalin's theory of socialism in one country).³⁹ In truth, Gramsci criticises what he sees, whether fairly or not, as the 'abstract cosmopolitanism' of the former just as much as the 'all-too-concrete provincialism' of the latter. His proposal is not an affiliation to one of the major camps in the Soviet Union claiming the inheritance of Lenin's legacy. Rather, in a muted key perhaps reflecting his distance and isolation from these debates, he suggests an alternative form of inheritance of this legacy that avoids the destructive antinomies into which the Russian leadership, and therefore the international movement, had fallen. In other words, Gramsci champions neither what later came to be described as Stalinism nor Trotskyism, but the reproposal of the 'last' Lenin's concept of hegemony as

³⁸ Paggi 1984, p. 381.

³⁹ Buci-Glucksmann argues that, in this note, Gramsci 'seems indirectly to take up a position in favour of socialism in one country' (Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 211). According to Rosengarten, 'Gramsci, in referring to an interview with Stalin (called Giuseppe Bessarione in the *Notebooks*) conducted by American journalists in September 1927 on the question of the continuity or discontinuity between Marx and Lenin, affirmed his conviction that Stalin's "national" communism was not at all in conflict with the internationalist aims of the socialist revolution' (Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 92). For an alternative perspective that stresses the need to read Gramsci's comments in their concrete political context—his opposition to the unilateral war of movement of the Comintern in the early 1930s, veering between opportunisms of Left and Right and issuing in the reckless and wrecking declaration of 'social fascism'—cf. Leonetti 1974. This latter approach seems to me the most productive. It issues in a reading of Gramsci's comments that may be characterised as a student playing off one teacher against another in order to oppose the claims of a self-proclaiming third. For Gramsci's insistence in these notes on hegemony in the national context, within an internationalist perspective, in fact combines a reference to Lenin in order to correct what Gramsci took to be Trotsky's line. At the same time, it also provides an immanent critique of the Stalinist reductive appropriation of Lenin's theory of hegemony in the struggle against Trotsky's 'permanent revolution'.

a possible dialectical third path through the impasse between socialism in one country and a 'uprooted' internationalist opposition in exile—a third path aimed precisely against Stalin's attempted reduction of hegemony solely to its prerevolutionary meanings.⁴⁰ The passage in full repays close attention. Gramsci writes that

a work (in the form of questions and answers) by Giuseppe Bessarione [the Italian translation of Joseph Vissarionovitch, i.e. Stalin] dating from September 1927: it deals with certain key problems of the science and art of politics. The problem which seems to me to need further elaboration is the following: how, according to the philosophy of praxis (in its political manifestation)—in the formulation of its founder but particularly in the clarification of its most recent great theoretician—the *international situation should be considered in its national aspect*. In reality, the 'national' relation is the result of an 'original', unique (in a certain sense) combination, which needs to be understood and conceived in this originality and uniqueness if one wishes to dominate it and lead it. *To be sure, the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national'*. It is from this point of departure that one must begin. *Yet the perspective is international and cannot be otherwise*. Consequently, it is necessary to study accurately the combination of national forces that the international class will have to lead and develop, in accordance with the international perspective and directives. The leading class is in fact only such if it accurately interprets this combination, of which it is itself a component and precisely as such is able to give the movement a certain direction, within certain perspectives. In my opinion, the fundamental disagreement between Leone Davidovici [i.e. Trotsky] and Bessarione as interpreter of the majority movement is on this point. The accusations of nationalism are inept if they refer to the nucleus of the question. If one studies the majoritarians' struggle from 1902 up to 1917, one sees that its originality consists in purging internationalism of every vague and purely ideological (in a pejorative sense) element, to give it a realistic political content. *It is in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together; one can well understand how certain tendencies either do not mention such a concept, or merely skim over it*. A

⁴⁰ Cf. Section 6.2.3 et sqq.

class that is international in character has—in as much as it guides social strata which are narrowly national (intellectuals), and indeed frequently even less than national: particularistic and municipalistic (the peasants)—to 'nationalise' itself in a certain sense. Moreover, this sense is not a very narrow one either, since before the conditions can be created for an economy that follows a world plan, it is necessary to pass through multiple phases in which the regional combinations (of groups of nations) may be of various kinds. Furthermore, it must never be forgotten that historical development follows the laws of necessity until the initiative has decisively passed over to the parts of the forces which tend towards construction in accordance with a plan of peaceful and solidary division of labour.

That non-national concepts (that is, concepts that cannot be referred to each individual country) are erroneous can be seen *ab absurdo*: they have led to passivity and inertia in two quite distinct phases: 1) *in the first phase, nobody believed that they ought to make a start—that is to say, they believed that by making a start they would find themselves isolated; they waited for everybody to move together, and nobody in the meantime moved or organised the movement*; 2) *the second phase is perhaps worse, because what is being awaited is an anachronistic and anti-natural form of 'Napoleonism' (since not all historical phases repeat themselves in the same form)*. The theoretical weaknesses of this modern form of the old mechanism are masked by the general theory of permanent revolution, which is nothing but a generic forecast presented as a dogma, and which demolishes itself, due to the fact that it is not actually manifested.⁴¹

Several features in particular should be noted in this complex and overdetermined—and eminently dialectical—passage:

1. Gramsci insists three times that 'the international situation should be considered in its national aspect', that the 'point of departure is "national"', that 'it is from this point of departure that one must begin'—and in all three cases prefaces or concludes his comments by insisting on the 'international perspective'. His thoughts are constructed in a dialectical tension between these perspectives, but it is a tension of 'stable disequilibrium', as Gramsci's constant return to the international perspective demonstrates.

⁴¹ Q 14, §68; *SPN*, pp. 240–1; italics mine.

Thus, immediately after having stressed that the national situation must be conceived in its 'originality and uniqueness', he feels the need to re-emphasise, though he had noted it only a few lines before, that 'the perspective is international and cannot be otherwise'. As in Gramsci's dialectical conception of the unity of the state, one term predominates over and explains the other; the 'integral' meaning of any given national situation can only be comprehended on the basis of its overdetermination by an international situation.

2. The form in which internationalism had been purged of 'vague and purely ideological' elements—throughout the 'majoritarians' struggle from 1902 up to 1917', but also 'in the clarification of [the philosophy of praxis's] most recent great theoretician'—in order to be given a realistic political content with which it could comprehend national conditions, is 'the concept of hegemony'. In other words, the concept of hegemony is the concrete nationalisation of the international perspective—which can *only be considered concretely* in its 'national' aspect, that is, its role within any given national formation. Conversely, the national situation can only be considered, as Gramsci incessantly repeats, in the international perspective. Those tendencies that do not comprehend such national exigencies in an international perspective 'either do not mention such a concept', *or* 'merely skim over it'. One cannot ignore and pay scant attention at the same time; clearly, Gramsci's reference here is at least twofold, that is, both to the neglect of hegemony *and* to superficial readings of its significance. We will shortly return to the significance of this seemingly enigmatic formulation.⁴²
3. Gramsci's critique of Trotsky does not issue in an endorsement of Stalin, either explicitly or implicitly. His concluding rejection of 'the general theory of permanent revolution' is based upon his assessment that it is a 'non-national concept' which leads to inertia in two phases, both equally messianic, the first 'weak' and the second eschatological. The rejection of 'Napoleonism', however, applies equally well if not more accurately to the Stalinist policies of 'charismatic leadership', national chauvinism and, soon, 'export' of the revolution—all based upon maintaining the masses in a passive and subaltern role—as it does to what Gramsci perceives

⁴² Cf. Section 6.2.3 et sqq.

as the 'abstractly cosmopolitan' 'adventurism' of Trotsky's position. In short, whatever Gramsci's intentions and whatever their reasons, the theoretical principles he adumbrates here amount to a profound critique of the fundamental tenets of Stalinism.⁴³

Gramsci's perspective thus remained fundamentally internationalist in character. Undoubtedly, the analytical point of departure perforce needed to be national; that is, 'an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country',⁴⁴ which Lenin, for reasons both of health and national location, had not been able to conduct but only to recommend; it remained the most pressing task for revolutionary agitation in the West. The *Prison Notebooks*, in part, were an attempt to take up this advice and deploy it on a specific national terrain. Yet, as Gramsci's continual references to other countries prove, even and especially in his analysis of Italian exceptionalism, this analysis could only be successfully conducted in international perspective, as an element of the global revolutionary movement.

6.1.6. Differential temporalities of the state

Anderson was thus correct to note that Gramsci's 'unexamined premise is that the State is the same in both East and West' and that Gramsci assumed that 'the social formations on each side of the divide exist in the *same temporality*'.⁴⁵ For Gramsci, as Lenin and Trotsky, the fundamental unity of the capitalist state-form in the epoch of imperialism was an historical fact not to

⁴³ Rosengarten provides an accurate assessment of Gramsci's unjustified suspicion of Trotsky in this particular context: 'In this attribution to Trotsky of putschism and advocacy of untimely and reckless risings by communist parties that did not enjoy the support of the majority of the working class, Gramsci was being unfair and indiscriminate. [...] Correct timing was always central to Trotsky's vision of political struggle, and at certain moments his manner of expressing himself could sound like adventurism, even though the substance of his thought, of his total *oeuvre*, belies any such attitude' (Rosengarten 1984–5, p. 83). On the Gramsci-Trotsky relationship, cf. also Bergami 1978. More recently, Saccarelli 2007 analyses the responses of both figures to the rise of Stalinism, indicating a clear preference for Trotsky as a resource for the contemporary revitalisation of Marxism. Maitan 1987 attempts to mediate between Gramsci and the revolutionary-Trotskyist tradition more generally in terms that could be described as 'political family resemblances', which perhaps remains the most productive approach to this complicated and highly overdetermined question.

⁴⁴ Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 238.

⁴⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 50.

be occluded by national exceptionalisms. Like Lenin, Gramsci held that the Russian Revolution had revealed a 'truth' regarding the state *as such* and the necessary conditions for its replacement by a 'State that is no State' (according to the theoretical model developed by Marx and Engels in the wake of the Paris Commune, to which Lenin made regular reference throughout 1917 in particular).⁴⁶ The successful deployment of the concept of *gegemoniya* in the Russian revolutionary movement had demonstrated that the established order of things in the state depended fundamentally upon the continuous establishment of order in civil society. When the Russian proletariat had demolished this pillar of state power by forging hegemony among the popular classes—in effect, subtracting their consent from the constituted power, in order to constitute their own—the time became ripe for the whole edifice to collapse and a new state to be constructed in its place.⁴⁷ Hegemony constituted the 'social basis' of power in the state (conceived in a limited sense, as governmental apparatus); expressed in the terms of the dialectical unity of the integral state, dominance in political society depended upon a class's mobilising capacities in civil society. This relation of elements was valid, albeit articulated differently, with different degrees of intensity, in both East and West alike.

Closer examination of famous East-West passage provides further evidence that Gramsci had broken with the 'tendential Bordigism' of his youth. The rhetorical excesses of Gramsci's assertion that the 'State was everything' have obscured the real focus of this passage as it emerges when read in context. Written in late 1930 (therefore, over two years before he comments in the *Notebooks* on Stalin and Trotsky's positions and urges a return to Lenin's insights in Q 14, § 68), Gramsci begins this note with a repudiation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution as a 'political reflection of the theory of war of manoeuvre',

⁴⁶ Cf. Lenin 1964, Volume 23, pp. 295–342; Lenin 1964, Volume 24, pp. 38–41; 57–91; 445–8.

⁴⁷ This insight was the precondition of Lenin's analysis of the objective (and not merely subjective) revolutionary conditions obtaining in the interregnum of 1917, encapsulated in the slogan of 'dual power': the soviets possessed a real social base that allowed them to contest the legitimacy of the provisional government. It was also, even more importantly for Gramsci's researches, as we shall see, the foundation of Lenin's final contribution to revolutionary strategy in the early years of the united front and the New Economic Policy (NEP). Cf. Sections 6.2.5. et sqq.

in the last analysis, the reflection of the general-economic-cultural-social conditions in a country in which the structures of national life are embryonic and loose, and incapable of becoming 'trench or fortress'.⁴⁸

Against what he describes as a 'cosmopolitan, that is, superficially national and superficially Occidental or European' theory, Gramsci opposes the 'profoundly national and profoundly European' formulations of Lenin.

It seems to me that Ilich understood that a change was necessary from the war of manoeuvre, applied victoriously in the East in 1917, to a war of position which was the only form possible in the West.⁴⁹

The geographical focus of the passage may seem to be self-evident. However, Gramsci immediately continues that 'this is what the formula of the "United Front" seems to me to mean'. It is this context—that is, the significance and novelty of the theory of the united front—that forms the immediate point of departure for Gramsci's assertion that 'in the East, the State was everything [...]'.⁵⁰

In reality, the geopolitical metaphor is deduced from the thesis of the united front, rather than forming its presupposition. As we shall see in the following section, the united front for Gramsci undoubtedly means practical and theoretical research into the 'only possible form' of revolutionary-socialist strategy in the Western social formations, due to the particular intensity of the relationship between state and civil society within them. 'The point of departure', that is, 'is "national"':⁵¹ 'an accurate reconnaissance of each individual country'.⁵¹ Yet

⁴⁸ Q 7, § 16. As is not often noted, the metaphor is not Gramsci's, but Trotsky's (cf. Trotsky 1974, pp. 220–2; cf. Section 6.1.4.). Gramsci's adoption of this motif should therefore be read as an attempt at immanent critique (albeit overdetermined by Gramsci's personal antipathy for Trotsky, a product of the curious master-slave dialectic to which Gramsci felt subjected after Trotsky's deliberate attacks upon him at the Fourth Congress, having recognised him as the 'weak link' in the Italians' intransigent ultra-leftism). Any attempt to read this note as mere repudiation of Trotsky must confront this more complex historical background, which does not lessen the serious miscalculation of Gramsci's seeming prioritisation of a personal grudge over political principles at a moment of real danger in the international debate (without, however, it should be remembered, engaging in public support of Stalin's purges—on the contrary, Gramsci's letter to the Soviet Party in 1926, undelivered by Togliatti, explicitly condemned such destructive procedures cf. Gramsci 1978, pp. 426–32).

⁴⁹ Q 7, § 16.

⁵⁰ Q 14, § 68; *SPN*, pp. 240–1.

⁵¹ Q 7, § 16.

the perspective is international and cannot be otherwise'.⁵² It is the dialectical unity of East and West, and not their antinomian opposition, that constitutes the 'essential terms of [Gramsci's] theoretical universe'.⁵³ As we will see, it is a unity that is given concrete political expression precisely in his elaboration of the *tactic* of the united front into a determining *strategic* perspective.

6.2. Hegemony, bourgeois and proletarian

The fourth assumption argues that Gramsci's concept of hegemony is indifferent to its class content. Both as a term of theoretical analysis and as a political strategy, this 'consensual power' is valid for proletarian and bourgeois leadership. In this sense, it represents a decisive departure from the pre-Revolutionary Bolshevik debates, which had developed a theory and strategy of hegemony that was specific to the proletariat. According to this reading, however, Gramsci's concept of hegemony is fundamentally a generic and formal theory of social power that can indifferently be applied to the contents of different class projects. Gramsci's point of departure, Anderson argued, had been the 'traditional' signification of the term. However, a series of 'generic maxims' derived from Machiavelli, 'in principle applicable' to either proletarian or bourgeois hegemony, 'mediated' the 'passage' from one usage to the other.⁵⁴ This transformation attempted to give analytical concreteness to an 'expanded' concept of hegemony already present in the debates of the early Third International, though only in a vague and rhetorical form, according to Anderson, related to the international situation. The result, however, was a theory of hegemony incapable of playing any meaningful strategic role. Expanded to comprehend any class projects in generic terms, it was no longer able to guide the analytical work necessary in order to determine the specific politi-

⁵² Q 14, §68.

⁵³ Anderson 1976a, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Anderson 1976a, p. 20. Francioni's demonstration of the philological error of this claim has already been noted (cf. Section 2.7). To this should be added a further objection, to be explored further below: the *Prison Notebooks's* point of departure for the analysis of hegemony in Q 1, §44 was the analysis of a specific historical bourgeois hegemonic project, namely, the Italian *Risorgimento*. In truth, Gramsci's understanding of the concept of hegemony had already undergone a decisive 'mediation' well before his incarceration—though through 'emulation' of very specific maxims of a very non-Florentine 'Secretary'.

cal conditions and challenges confronted by the working-class movement in its attempt to overthrow the capitalist state. Of all the commonly received 'images of Gramsci', this is in fact the most debilitating assumption; for, once class determination is absented from Gramsci's concept of hegemony, it becomes merely another variation within the problematic of (a particular concept of) sovereignty that dominated bourgeois political theory in the twentieth century. Ultimately, it issues in a pallid theory of 'governance' as a 'technical', i.e. non-political, concern.⁵⁵

6.2.1. A generic theory of social power?

Anderson was correct to note that Gramsci extended a concept originally used to theorise the leading role of the Russian proletariat in the struggle against Tsarist absolutism, in order *both* to advocate a strategy for the European (and more broadly, international) working-class movement *and also* to analyse the forms of established bourgeois state power in the West. This duality represents one of the decisive differences between the concepts of *gegemoniya*, in both its 'classical', pre-Revolutionary and early Third-Internationalist usage on the international terrain, and Gramsci's *egemonia*. Such an expanded optic was not, however, a theoretical confusion that slowly and unintentionally emerged from the indeterminate language Gramsci was forced to use in order to trick the prison censor. Rather, it was a conscious and deliberate choice, from the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks*' project, to reconstruct the history of the bourgeois integral state from the perspective of a 'truth' revealed during an attempt to overcome it. Having recognised the Bolsheviks' concrete realisation of Marx's critique of the 'secret' of the state in an adequate political strategy, Gramsci then attempted to 'recreate' its theoretical preconditions with regard to those states in which it had not yet been applied. It was a theoretically audacious 'manoeuvre' in the 'war of position' in the West, rewriting occidental narratives in terms derived from meditation on events in the East, but which nevertheless were found to have a more general analytic validity.

⁵⁵ As presciently noted by Buci-Glucksmann, despite her Eurocommunist sympathies: 'if the Gramscian concept of hegemony is flattened into the concept of a "process of legitimation" [...] this leads directly to viewing hegemony as the establishment of a consensus over society as a whole' (Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 57).

This represents Gramsci's real contribution to the development of the concept of hegemony: he attempts to theorise Lenin's elaboration of the concept *and practice* of hegemony in the post-Revolutionary conjuncture.⁵⁶ Gramsci then deployed this criterion in order to analyse the history of the bourgeois social formations, within the perspective of a theory of the bourgeois-capitalist state that, as we have seen, is in full accord with the classical-Marxist tradition's characterisation of it as a class state. Gerratana fell prey to an inaccurate formulation when he argued that the *Prison Notebooks* present

a general theory of hegemony: a theory, that is, that could be referable both to proletarian hegemony and to bourgeois hegemony, as, in general, to any relation of hegemony.⁵⁷

For Gramsci's theory of hegemony 'lives only in concrete studies', or, rather, is developed by means of analytical deployment within a theory of state power of which it is only one element. More accurately, Gerratana continued to argue that Gramsci's concept of hegemony is an 'analytical concept', 'valid for purposes of knowledge, not a model that can be proposed in practice as indication of a selection of values'.⁵⁸ It is in this analytical sense—as a determinate abstraction that remains linked to its concrete historical referents—that Gramsci's concept of hegemony must be understood.

This is to say that the distinctive nature and form of proletarian hegemony remains the *Leitmotiv* of the entire *Prison Notebooks* project—even and especially in those passages where Gramsci uses the concept in order to analyse the structurally and qualitatively different forms of bourgeois class domination in Western Europe in the epoch of the passive revolution. They are analysed from the perspective of the possibility of their absence; the realisation of proletarian hegemony in the East was the precondition for imagining the destruction of bourgeois dominance in the West. In their turn, these studies enriched Gramsci's understanding of what would be necessary in order to construct forms of proletarian hegemony capable of 'constituting an epoch' of a very different type, on an international scale.

⁵⁶ Cf. Section 6.2.3.

⁵⁷ Gerratana 1997, p. 122.

⁵⁸ Gerratana 1997, p. 123.

Throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, there is a dialectical relationship between Gramsci's studies of achieved bourgeois hegemony and his proposals for the construction of its proletarian antithesis. He does not begin by asserting the concept of proletarian hegemony in its sheer, indeterminate immediacy. Rather, it is the analysis of bourgeois hegemony that constitutes his point of departure. This was necessarily the case: insofar as the proletariat perforce begins the construction of its hegemonic project from a subaltern position, its theoretical comprehension must ascend along the same path, beginning from the theoretical dissection of the solidified integral state of bourgeois passive revolution, in order to dismantle it in reality. Gramsci, that is, first 'tarries' with the negative, before critically elaborating his own positive conception. The concept of a future and possible proletarian hegemony emerges from a more exact appreciation of the nature of the actual and effective bourgeois hegemony against which it must struggle. A corollary of this is that, if these conditions are necessarily 'national', the perspective from which they are viewed is similarly necessarily 'internationalist'.

Already in his first notebook, 'Class political leadership [*direzione*] before and after going to government', Gramsci begins to outline the 'historico-political criterion' that must be laid at the foundation of his own researches: 'a class is dominant in two ways, namely it is "leading" and "dominant"'. It leads the allied classes, it dominates the opposed classes'.⁵⁹ The formulation, taken on its own, would seem to be a direct reference to the integration of the pre-Revolutionary uses of hegemony in Russia (leading allied classes) with the post-Revolutionary emphasis upon the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (dominating the opposed classes). Significantly, however, Gramsci's immediate point of reference is not the Russian Revolution, but the Italian *Risorgimento* and the role of the Moderates in the Partito d'Azione (and, in particular, their capacity to lead before achieving explicit political dominance, which in turn, once achieved, continued to rely upon a diffuse leadership that was concretised in the capacity to 'absorb' other currents). Already from the very beginning of the *Prison Notebooks*, therefore, Gramsci is using the concept of hegemony in order to analyse the specificity of the Western social formations.

Even more significantly, Gramsci's experience of the Russian situation prompted him to think in terms of the concrete forms of hegemony. Thus,

⁵⁹ Q 1, §44.

his theoretical characterisation of the role of the Moderates in terms of hegemony is immediately followed by an extensive analysis of the complex cultural forms and practices that emerged in the hegemonic relations of the *Risorgimento*, ranging from newspapers, popular literature, education, language policies, masonry and a veritable host of other 'trenches' in the embryonic new Italian civil society. In order to comprehend these analyses theoretically, he will soon develop the concept of a 'hegemonic apparatus'. In so doing, he will concretise his notion of the specific form of a class's transformation of social forces in civil society into its political power in political society. This will result in a theory of *class power*.

6.2.2. The hegemonic apparatus: political power as immanent to class power

Gramsci's specific concept of a 'hegemonic apparatus' has not enjoyed the same popular reception as its genus. As Buci-Glucksmann notes, 'if the concept of hegemony has been the object of numerous analyses, the same could not be said of the hegemonic apparatuses'.⁶⁰ Yet, strictly taken, the distinctiveness of Gramsci's own concept of hegemony consists precisely in this 'micro-concept' of the concrete form in which hegemony is exercised. Again, as Buci-Glucksmann argues,

the hegemonic apparatus qualifies the concept of hegemony and gives it greater precision, hegemony being understood as the political and cultural hegemony of the dominant classes. As a complex set of institutions, ideologies, practices and agents (including the 'intellectuals'), the hegemonic apparatus only finds its unity when the expansion of a class is under analysis. Hegemony is only unified into an apparatus by reference to the class that constitutes itself in and by the mediation of various sub-systems.⁶¹

The concept of hegemonic apparatus can therefore be regarded as the 'class-focused' complement to Gramsci's new, 'general notion of the State'. In other words, if the concept of the integral state seeks to delineate the forms and modalities by which a given class stabilises and makes more or less enduring its institutional-political power in political society, the concept of a 'hegemonic

⁶⁰ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 63.

⁶¹ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 48.

apparatus' attempts to chart the ways in which it ascends to power through the intricate network of social relationships of civil society. It is an ascent that must be repeated each day if a class's project is to remain capable of assuming institutional (that is, political, understood in the narrow sense) power in a society. In a very real sense, a class's hegemonic apparatus constitutes its *Lebenswelt*, the horizon within which its class project is elaborated and within which it also seeks to interpellate and integrate its antagonists.⁶² In this sense, as I have previously suggested, Gramsci's concept of a hegemonic apparatus can be comprehended as a realistic translation of the themes that have more recently been proposed under the thesis of *biopower* and *biopolitics*; a thesis that remains, in my view, despite its proponents' claims, overdetermined by the modern conception of sovereignty that obscures the specific nature of *class* power.

The concept of the hegemonic apparatus first appears in a note written in February-March 1930, where Gramsci points to the 'crisis of the principle of authority' following World War I in which the established 'hegemonic apparatus peels away [*si screpola*] and the exercise of hegemony becomes ever more difficult'.⁶³ The concept is defined in theoretical terms in a note from mid-1931,⁶⁴ entitled 'Organisation of the National Societies' (significantly, a note in which Gramsci distinguishes between 'progressive' and 'reactionary totalitarianisms').

⁶² Althusser attempted to translate this aspect of the materiality of Gramsci's hegemonic apparatus into his own thought with the concept of the 'ideological State apparatuses', which he acknowledged was in part inspired by the *Prison Notebooks*: 'To my knowledge, Gramsci is the only one who went any distance in the road I am taking. He had the "remarkable" idea that the State could not be reduced to the (Repressive) State Apparatus, but included, as he put it, a certain number of institutions from "*civil society*": the Church, the Schools, the trade unions, etc. Unfortunately, Gramsci did not systematize his intuitions, which remained in the state of acute but fragmentary notes' (Althusser 1971a, p. 142; cf. Althusser 2006 pp. 138–50). At the same time, there remained residual traces of Althusser's earlier 'theoreticist' conception of ideology in his conjugation of this Gramscian-inspired perspective with 'Ideology in general', which was assigned responsibility for subject-formation. Combined with an undifferentiated concept of the state, these lacunae, arguably, led Althusser's theory towards a thesis of 'ideological totalisation' that Gramsci's concept avoided by its focus on class-constitution. For a trenchant critique of Althusser's reading of Gramsci on this point, perhaps their closest point of contact, cf. Bollinger and Koivisto 2001, pp. 1267–8. Cf. also Liguori 1996, p. 138 for a differentiation between the Gramscian and Althusserian concepts.

⁶³ Q 1, §48.

⁶⁴ Q 6, §136; *SPN*, pp. 264–5.

I have remarked elsewhere that in any given society nobody is disorganised and without party, provided that one takes organisation and party in a broad and not a formal sense. In this multiplicity of private associations (which are of two kinds: natural, and contractual or voluntary) one or more predominates relatively or absolutely—constituting the hegemonic apparatus of one social group over the rest of the population (or civil society): the basis of the State in the narrow sense of the governmental-coercive apparatus.⁶⁵

A class's hegemonic apparatus is the wide-ranging series of articulated institutions (understood in the broadest sense) and practices—from newspapers to educational organisations to political parties—by means of which a class and its allies engage their opponents in a struggle for political power.⁶⁶ This concept traverses the boundaries of the so-called public (pertaining to the state) and private (civil society), to include all initiatives by means of which a class concretises its hegemonic project in an integral sense. The hegemonic apparatus is the means by which a class's forces in civil society are translated into power in political society. Or, to modify the concept of the capitalist state in Poulantzas's late works, the hegemonic apparatus is a 'material condensation of a relation of forces' *within* a class or class alliance that permits it to confront its antagonist at a political level.⁶⁷

Political power is here conceived not in a generic sense, but in specific terms, as the quality or capacity of a class: as the capacity, or incapacity, to act of one class in relation to another, but also as the ability of a class's initiatives in political society to relate adequately to its 'social basis' in civil society. In other words, for Gramsci, political power is immanent not simply to the state as a condensation of power relations (relations between classes), as it arguably is for the late Poulantzas.⁶⁸ Rather, it is immanent to the hegemonic projects by means of which classes constitute themselves as classes (relations within classes) capable of exercising political power (as opposed to an incoherent mass of 'corporative' interests confined to the terrain of civil society). Only subsequently do such concrete social relations, in their relationships with other classes, take on state-form. Nor is political power, or rather, politics itself, sim-

⁶⁵ Q 6, §136; *SPN*, pp. 264–5.

⁶⁶ Cf. Q 3, §49; *FSPN*, pp. 155–6.

⁶⁷ Poulantzas 1978.

⁶⁸ For a critique of Poulantzas's reading of Gramsci on this point, cf. Thomas 2006.

ply the 'concentrated expression of the economy', in Lenin's famous formulation.⁶⁹ Rather, the 'official' politics of 'political society' is a condensation of the social forces in civil society that are themselves already, on the one hand, 'condensations' of economic interests and, on the other hand, overdetermined by the hegemonic relations emanating from political society that constitute civil society as a *Kampfplatz* of hegemonic projects. A class's potential for political power therefore depends upon its ability to find the institutional forms adequate to the *differentia specifica* of its own particular hegemonic project.

In the assimilative form of the integral state of the passive revolution, the bourgeoisie had found a way to advance its own contradictory form of modernisation (liberation and massive increase of forces of production through a collective work process, defence of private property through limitation of political power of the labouring and popular classes).⁷⁰ Crucially, it relied upon the continuing demobilisation of proletarian forces.⁷¹ Above all, it was structurally committed to mystifying the true nature of its project, by means of a 'manufactured' consent, 'passive and indirect' rather than 'active and direct'.⁷² As Gerratana argues,

a class that manages to lead, and not only to dominate, in a society based economically on class exploitation, and in which the continuance of such exploitation is desired, is constrained to use forms of hegemony that obscure this situation and mystify this exploitation; it therefore needs forms of hegemony designed to give rise to a manipulated consent, a consent of subaltern allies.⁷³

The state apparatus of the bourgeoisie could be neutralised only when the proletariat had deprived it of its 'social basis' through the elaboration of an alternative hegemonic project and its concretisation in a hegemonic apparatus adequate to it. In the terms Lenin adopted from Marx and Engels in order to describe the Paris Commune and the soviets as a 'special type of state', it would be necessary to coordinate class forces in civil society in a way that would

⁶⁹ Lenin 1964, Volume 32, p. 32.

⁷⁰ Cf. Q 8, §2; *SPN*, p. 260.

⁷¹ Cf. Q 25, §5; *SPN*, pp. 52–4.

⁷² Q 15, §13.

⁷³ Gerratana 1997, p. 124.

permit the proletariat, against the domination practised by the bourgeoisie, to elaborate its own enabling 'power of a completely different type'.⁷⁴

What inspired Gramsci to propose this precision of the concept of hegemony? Paraphrasing Anderson's assertion of the Crocean genealogy of Gramsci's state theory,⁷⁵ we could say that 'Gramsci did not produce the idea' of an immanent intensification of class power in institutional forms 'from nowhere. He took it, quite directly, from' ... Lenin.

6.2.3. Which Lenin?

Among Gramsci's most famous remarks on Lenin in the *Prison Notebooks* is a comparison to Saint Paul. More recently, Žižek and Badiou have re-proposed this image, according to a particular understanding of the early Christian agitator and the Bolshevik theoretician: Lenin as Damascene 'Event' that issued in a singular 'Truth' calling for our fidelity. Thus, for Žižek, Lenin proposes a 'Politics of Truth';⁷⁶ for Badiou, Lenin is a 'militant figure', like Saint Paul, penning 'militant documents', intervening in the conjuncture he had helped to bring about.⁷⁷ In one form or another, these perspectives continue the Althusserian emphasis upon Lenin as theorist of the conjuncture. For Althusser, Lenin's great contribution to Marxist theory was the analysis of the structure of a conjuncture;⁷⁸ Poulantzas, the associate of Althusser with whom this

⁷⁴ Lenin 1964, Volume 24, p. 38. Seemingly a 'strictly' political thesis, the concept of a hegemonic apparatus is central to Gramsci's conception of the philosophy of praxis *qua* philosophy. Insofar as a hegemonic apparatus intervenes on and modifies the relations of force in the superstructures or ideologies, 'the theoretical-practical principle of hegemony', Gramsci argues, 'also has a gnoseological significance [*portata*] [...] Ilich would have effectively advanced philosophy as philosophy insofar as he advanced political doctrine and practice. The realisation of a hegemonic apparatus, insofar as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of forms of consciousness [*delle coscienze*] and the methods of knowledge, it is a fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact' (Q 10II, §12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6; written in late May 1932). Cf. also 'realised hegemony signifies the real critique of a philosophy, its real dialectic' (Q 7, §33; *SPN*, pp. 381–2; written in February 1931). These themes will be explored at greater length in Sections 7.3. and 8.6.

⁷⁵ Anderson 1976a, p. 39.

⁷⁶ Žižek 2001, p. 2; cf. more recently Budgen, Kouvelakis and Žižek (eds.) 2007.

⁷⁷ Badiou 2003, pp. 2, 31.

⁷⁸ 'This is what is irreplaceable in Lenin's texts: the analysis of the structure of a *conjuncture*, the displacements and condensations of its contradictions and their paradoxical unity, all of which are the very existence of that "current situation" which

interpretative line is most associated, generalised this assessment of Lenin's legacy into a methodology of Marxist political theory; it has since become a verity in the wider Althusserian-influenced Marxist culture.⁷⁹ Žižek's and Badiou's Pauline metaphor, for all the differences from the earlier Althusserian interpretation, agree on this fundamental point: the 'essential' Lenin is captured in the figure of the revolutionary leader who knew how to seize the *Augenblick*, in order to smash the bourgeois state apparatus. In this, they find themselves in fundamental agreement with the interpretation of Lenin's thought proposed in different forms by both right and left wings of the international Communist movement in the 1920s: Stalin never ceased to praise Lenin as the 'founding father' who had *made* the revolution, while Lukács, in an attempted speculative conservation of the energies that had propelled the far Left in the immediate post-Revolutionary conjuncture, famously declared that

the actuality of the revolution [...] is the core of Lenin's thought.⁸⁰

For Gramsci, on the other hand, Lenin's greatest and most enduring contribution to Marxism lies elsewhere. The precise terms of his comparison of Lenin to the Tarsian are here revealing; for, whereas Žižek and Badiou tend towards a romanticised image of a *Philosoph der Tat*, Gramsci emphasises much more 'mundane' similarities. Marx and Lenin express

political action was to transform, in the strongest sense of the word, between February and October, 1917' (Althusser 1969, p. 179).

⁷⁹ For a representative example, see Lecercle 2005, p. 37.

⁸⁰ Lukács 1970, p. 11. Alongside his recent reproposal of Lenin's thought, Žižek has also promoted the Lukács of the period of *History and Class Consciousness* and its aftermath, assisting in the diffusion of Lukács's long forgotten defence of his major work against Comintern condemnation: an owl of Minerva of the revolutionary far Left of the early 1920s. Lukács did however return to Lenin in another one of his left phases, in which he proposed a slightly different picture of the world-historical significance of Lenin's thought, in some respects closer to that of Gramsci's 'democratic philosopher' (cf. Sections 6.2.4. and 9.5.). In the 1967 postscript to his *Lenin* study, he argued that 'there has been an important change in human attitudes to reality over the last centuries: the ideal of the Stoic-Epicurean "sage" has had a very strong influence on our ethical, political and social opinions, well beyond the limits of academic philosophy. But this influence was equally an inner transformation: the active-practical element in this prototype has become far stronger than in ancient times. Lenin's permanent readiness is the latest and till now the highest and most important stage of this development [...] the figure of Lenin as the very embodiment of permanent readiness represents an ineradicable value—a new form of exemplary attitude to reality' (Lukács 1970, p. 101).

two phases: science-action, which are homogeneous and heterogeneous at the same time. Thus, historically, a parallel between Christ and St. Paul would be absurd. Christ-*Weltanschauung*, and St. Paul-organisation, action, expansion of the *Weltanschauung*: both are necessary to the same degree and therefore are of the same historical stature.⁸¹

Without in any sense minimising the importance of Lenin's pre-Revolutionary agitation for the hegemony of the proletariat (the author of an article entitled 'The Revolution Against *Capital*' was not likely to forget this), Gramsci stresses that Lenin's truly 'original and creative contribution'⁸² to Marxism was his post-Revolutionary concrete elaboration 'in his capacity as the leader of a state and practical realiser, beyond being political theoriser, of hegemony'.⁸³ That is, it was not only the 'theorisation', but also, crucially, 'the *realisation* of hegemony carried out by Ilich' that constituted the living soul of Gramsci's Leninism.⁸⁴ To what does this phrase, 'the realisation of hegemony', refer? Is it merely 'Hegelese' for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and thus the *Aufhebung*—in a limited and negative sense, as cancellation—of the pre-Revolutionary struggle for hegemony?

If this were case, Gramsci's concept of hegemony would indeed be closer to Stalin's than Lenin's, as Bobbio mischievously implicitly suggested when he drew attention to the relative absence of the word 'hegemony' in Lenin's texts.⁸⁵ For it was precisely in this sense that not only Stalin but also Bukharin deployed the notion of 'Leninist hegemony' in their struggle against Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.⁸⁶ As Gerratana argues,

it is significant, for example, that Stalin's *Principles of Leninism* speaks of hegemony only in relation to the alliance of the workers and peasants in the period of the bourgeois-democratic revolution against Tsarism, while for the

⁸¹ Q 7, §33; *SPN*, p. 381; written in 1931.

⁸² Q 7, §35.

⁸³ Frosini 2003, p. 98. 'The "Leninism" of Gramsci [is] thoroughly mediated by the political thematic of the Third International Congress, which constitutes for Lenin himself a completely new landscape with respect to that in which he has accumulated his previous experience' (Paggi 1984, p. 18). We will shortly return to the specificity of this particular form of 'Leninism', qualitatively distinct from either its Stalinist variant or those more recent Pauline transmutations.

⁸⁴ Q 7, §35; italics mine.

⁸⁵ Bobbio 1990, p. 59; cf. Roth 1972, p. 106.

⁸⁶ Cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 174.

following period it is said that 'the hegemony of the proletariat was the bud of the dictatorship of the proletariat' and would have served in substance as a 'transition to the proletarian dictatorship'. It seems therefore that for Stalin, in the new perspectives of socialism, the question had lost its actuality.⁸⁷

It is in this optic that Gramsci's emphasis upon hegemony in his letter to the Central Committee of the Russian Party in 1926 becomes clear; it is in this optic that we can finally see the concrete referent of his argument from 1933 that, after the Bolsheviks had already purged internationalism of 'every vague and purely ideological [...] element' from 1902 to 1917, giving it a 'realistic political content', it is now

in the concept of hegemony that those exigencies which are national in character are knotted together; one can well understand how certain tendencies either do not mention such a concept, or merely skim over it.⁸⁸

Finally, it is in this optic that we can see that Gramsci's 'point of departure' was expressly *not* the pre-Revolutionary formulation of the concept of hegemony, corrupted or not by early Third-Internationalist usages. One of the great merits of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' was to redirect attention to the roots of Gramsci's theory of hegemony in the Bolshevik experience, a position which has since been accepted in much anglophone scholarship. Anderson misapprehended, however, the 'differential temporality' of Gramsci's true historical reference. As we have seen, the pre-Revolutionary notion of hegemony had been focused upon the relations between subaltern classes in a bourgeois-democratic revolution (the *smychka* between workers and peasants) and counterposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat in a socialist revolution, as Anderson, conscientious student of Trotsky, noted.⁸⁹ Gramsci, however, explicitly does *not* counterpose the two, arguing instead that the hegemony of the proletariat constitutes the 'complement' of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Significantly, he does so at a time precisely when the deformed Stalinist dictatorship over the proletariat was threatening to extinguish any possibility of hegemonic politics in the Soviet Union. Gramsci knew very well

⁸⁷ Gerrata 1997, p. 121. Boothman 2005 provides further evidence of a continuing 'hegemonic' discourse in Stalin's texts.

⁸⁸ Q 14, §68; SPN pp. 240–1.

⁸⁹ Anderson 1976a, p. 17.

that Stalin was deploying this definition aggressively and recklessly in his battle against not merely Trotsky but also against the historical record of Lenin's leadership of the workers' state, the most lethal critique possible of Stalin's bureaucracy;⁹⁰ and Stalin explicitly claims such heritage in the interview Gramsci discusses in *Q 14*, §68. Glorification of the mythical figure of the pre-Revolutionary Lenin, including his concept of hegemony, perversely allowed Stalin all the more effectively to avoid a real confrontation with Lenin's practice.

Against this attempt to monopolise the 'Leninist' concept of hegemony with a superficial reading of a prior stage of its development, Gramsci insisted on the need to update the explicit theoretical concept in order to comprehend the *practical* advances in hegemonic politics that Lenin had made in his final battles (without, however, fully formulating such advances theoretically with the word 'hegemony'). If Gramsci's position had been clarified, elaborated and diffused throughout the workers' movement, it could have constituted a profound attack on one of the most powerful elements of prestige Stalin possessed. Precise formulations in the *Prison Notebooks*, read alongside Lenin's final texts and the documents of the early Third International, make it clear that Gramsci's reference was to *this* Lenin: the Lenin who had attempted in the post-Revolutionary conjuncture to reformulate the practice of hegemony as an integral moment *within* the dictatorship of the proletariat, allowing it to go beyond its 'transitional form' of the early post-Revolutionary years in order to lay the basis for a proletarian integral state.⁹¹

6.2.4. The realisation of hegemony

The concept of hegemony, *contra* Anderson's narrative, did not fall into 'relative disuse in the Bolshevik party', 'rendered inoperative [within the USSR] by the advent of a socialist revolution'.⁹² Not only did it survive in the 'external documents of the Communist International',⁹³ as either prescient advice to

⁹⁰ Cf. Stalin 1954, Volumes 5–9 in particular (texts from 1921–9) for Stalin's recurrent usage of the term hegemony in this period. Cf. Boothman 2005 for an overview of Stalin's usage in comparison to other Bolshevik leaders.

⁹¹ Cf. Bettelheim 1976, p. 506; cf. also Frosini 2003, pp. 95–8.

⁹² Anderson 1976a, p. 17.

⁹³ Anderson 1976a, p. 18.

those national working classes on the other side of the Rubicon of the seizure of state power to follow the Russian path, or as a mere rhetorical synonym for bourgeois 'domination' (at the Fourth Congress in 1922); the concept of hegemony also, and much more importantly, played a decisive role in the internal political debates of the fledgling workers' republic. As Buci-Glucksmann argues, 'after the October seizure of power, Lenin was led to define a relatively new relationship between hegemony and dictatorship of the proletariat'.⁹⁴ The ongoing reformulation of this concept—a reformulation necessary in order to comprehend the distinctive challenges of the new conjuncture—played a particularly important role in resolutions at two decisive post-Revolutionary Bolshevik party congresses, the Eighth and Tenth Congresses in particular. Dispensing with the pre-Revolutionary opposition of proletarian hegemony and dictatorship, hegemony (over allied subaltern classes) and dictatorship (over the bourgeoisie and aristocracy) were now integrated as complementary moments of the same revolutionary process. The one comprehended its 'civil' content just as the other expressed its 'political' form. The guiding perspectives of the pre-Revolutionary debates on the concept of hegemony, that is, were 'sublated'—elevated and preserved as a moment within a higher form, rather than cancelled—within the thesis and reality of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In this context, hegemony/leadership (the two being effectively synonymous, it will be remembered, in Lenin's vocabulary) came to denote 'the alternative strategy of the proletariat, the leading role of the working class in the proletarian dictatorship'.⁹⁵ Gramsci clearly detected this 'sea-change' when he argued in May 1932 that

the greatest modern theoretician of the philosophy of praxis, on the terrain of political struggle and organisation and with a political terminology—in opposition to the various 'economistic' tendencies—revalued the front of cultural struggle and constructed the doctrine of hegemony as a complement to the theory of the State-as-force, and as the actual form of the Forty-Eightist doctrine of 'permanent revolution'.⁹⁶

While the reference to 'economistic' tendencies could be confused with Lenin's earlier arguments in, for example, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy*, the clear

⁹⁴ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 177.

⁹⁵ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 184.

⁹⁶ *Q* 101, § 12; *SPN*, p. 56.

reference to the doctrine of hegemony as the ‘complement’ of the theory of the state-as-force knows no precedent before Lenin’s last writings on a need for a ‘cultural revolution’ in the Russian social formation, equipping the sub-altern classes with the cultural resources—the ‘superstructures’, in Gramsci’s terms—they needed to govern their own non-state state.⁹⁷ Most significantly, Gramsci presents this concept of hegemony as the ‘actual form’ of the Forty-Eightist doctrine of ‘permanent revolution’. As we have seen, however, according to Gramsci (following Engels, among others), the Forty-Eightist doctrine of ‘permanent revolution’ had been a strategy of war of movement, still valid at the time of the Russian Revolution in the East. Now, Gramsci argues that the logic of the war of position has invested the Russian revolutionary process itself; the struggle to revalue the front of cultural struggle—‘in opposition to “economistic” tendencies’—is no longer the struggle against non-Bolshevik currents, as it had been in Lenin’s earlier polemics; rather, they are now tendencies within the ‘majority movement’ itself.⁹⁸ For Gramsci’s reference here is to the form in which the proletariat’s alternative strategy of leadership was realised, after the years of ‘attempted “frontal attack”’ of war communism’: the elaboration of ‘a *war of position*’ by means of and within the New Economic Policy (NEP).⁹⁹

6.2.5. The NEP

The NEP is often comprehended in terms of a ‘necessary retreat’, or ‘an ensemble of temporary compromises’.¹⁰⁰ It was in these terms that Lenin seems to have proposed the NEP in early 1921, almost as the lesser of two evils after the near collapse of the Soviet economy during the Civil War;¹⁰¹ it was

⁹⁷ Bettelheim 1976 and 1978 examines Lenin’s final legacy in detail. Frosini 2003, pp. 95–7 provides the clearest presentation of these themes in relation to Gramsci’s formulations. As he convincingly demonstrates, Gramsci’s comments in the *Prison Notebooks* only make sense when read in relation to the ‘last’ Lenin’s theoretical statements and, more importantly, concrete acts.

⁹⁸ *Q* 101, § 12.

⁹⁹ Bettelheim 1978, p. 23. Lih 1991 and 1999 provide a diametrically opposed narrative of continuity across different phases of the revolutionary process.

¹⁰⁰ Séverac 1999, pp. 805–6.

¹⁰¹ By the time of the Third Congress in June–July, however, Lenin was already researching the expansive dimensions of new economic *and* cultural policies. Cf. *Kommunistische Internationale* 1921, pp. 746–66.

in these terms that Trotsky seems to have initially begrudgingly accepted it, as a necessity in order to stabilise the first workers's state as it waited for the return of the revolutionary wave in the more advanced capitalist formations.¹⁰² In no sense, however, could its initial economic content be regarded as a combative 'two steps forward'. Similarly, it was in the form of 'a great leap forward after one step backwards' that Bukharin championed the NEP, after his conversion from 'Left Communism' to a version of market socialism.¹⁰³ Gramsci also seems to have comprehended the NEP in such 'negative terms' when he speaks in late 1932 or 1933 of the necessity of a leading social group finding a 'certain balance of compromise' with its allied strata and of making 'sacrifices of an economico-corporative kind'.¹⁰⁴

Yet, in the same note, he explicitly presents these features as preconditions for the 'fact of hegemony'.

The fact of hegemony presupposes that account is taken of the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain balance of compromise is formed—in other words, that the leading group makes sacrifices of an economico-corporative kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic; it must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.¹⁰⁵

How could such compromises and sacrifices, seemingly defeats, be understood in such positive terms, preconditions of the 'fact of hegemony' and confirmation of its 'realisation'?

The paradox is lessened if we consider, following Bettelheim, that 'actually, the NEP was something other than a mere "retreat", the metaphor that was first used to define it'.¹⁰⁶ It also, crucially, included political dimensions that were decisive for the particular importance Gramsci assigned to it. In at least one of

¹⁰² 'The so-called *New Economic Policy* [...] is frequently called a retreat, and we ourselves—for good and substantial reasons—call it a retreat' (Trotsky 1974, p. 231). Trotsky went on to outline a notion of the NEP as a tactical retreat within an offensive strategic perspective.

¹⁰³ Cf. Cohen 1973.

¹⁰⁴ Q 13, § 18; *SPN*, p. 161; cf. Q 4, § 38; written in October 1930.

¹⁰⁵ Q 13, 18; cf. Q 4, 38.

¹⁰⁶ Bettelheim 1978, p. 22.

its formulations, that is, the NEP was not merely a defensive measure, but an attempt to find a combative form, in unpropitious circumstances, that would both permit the continuation of the revolutionary restructuring of Soviet society set in train by October 1917 and give sustenance to an international revolutionary movement in temporary abeyance. Presenting it as much more than a merely economic measure, the 'last' Lenin sought to formulate the political significance of the NEP. On the national terrain,

it was an active alliance between the working class and the peasantry: an alliance that was more and more clearly defined by Lenin as intended not just to ensure 'restoration of the economy' but also to make it possible to lead the peasant masses along the road to socialism, through the aid—economic, ideological, and political—brought to them by the proletariat.¹⁰⁷

In these terms, the NEP was just as much a 'cultural revolution' as it was an 'economic' one, aiming at the renovation of the social relations (of production, but also other social relations) upon which the Soviet state had been forced to found itself. Fundamentally, *this* NEP was premised on the thesis on the 'primacy of politics', as the terrain of transformative social relations that could provide the dynamism to overcome the economic contradictions that threatened to destroy the fledgling workers' state.¹⁰⁸

6.2.6. Gramsci's NEP

In these terms, the NEP's significance was primarily a 'national' one. Gramsci had argued in a letter to Togliatti in 1926 that what was now decisive for the confidence of the international movement, at such distance from the initial

¹⁰⁷ Bettelheim 1978, p. 22; cf. Bettelheim 1976, p. 506; cf. Frosini 2003, p. 97. Bettelheim 1976, pp. 497–503 contains an analysis of the hesitant metaphors that allowed Lenin's notion of the NEP to be read in terms solely of a retreat, without noting the new, more 'offensive' meaning he sought to give to it, after its initial formulation, in terms of a 'revolutionary transformation of the superstructure as a condition for transforming the economic base' (p. 495).

¹⁰⁸ The notion of 'cultural revolution' in Lenin's final battles is analysed in Claudin-Urondo 1975. Cf. Lenin 1964, Volume 33, pp. 487–8; Lenin 1964, Volume 32, pp. 341–2. For recent studies of the cultural and social impact of the NEP on everyday life in Soviet society, cf. Fitzpatrick 1992, Fitzpatrick et al. 1991 and Pethybridge 1991. For a classic account of 'Lenin's last struggle', cf. Lewin 1975.

enthusiasms of the revolutionary period, was the conviction that the proletariat could actually construct socialism.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Lenin had emphasised that

considering the development of the proletarian revolution as a single process, the importance of the current epoch in Russia consists in being able to try and to verify in practice the politics of the proletariat in power in relation to the petty bourgeois masses.¹¹⁰

However, even more importantly, the NEP also had a political and theoretical significance on the international terrain that derived, conversely, precisely from its national and empirical meaning in the Soviet Union. As Paggi argues,

the experience of government undertaken in Russia by the Bolsheviks, throwing light on problems that had remained in the shadows in Marxism, increases the theoretical and political heritage of the movement; but this experience, precisely because undertaken in a backward country, shows in a deflected light the future problems of the governing of a workers' state in advanced capitalist countries and helps to foresee with greater precision the stages that need to be passed through by the Communist parties of these countries, before seriously confronting the problem of power.¹¹¹

In short, in at least one of its dimensions, the NEP was a laboratory for the construction of a hegemonic apparatus within the *involucro* of the newly founded 'political society' of Soviet democracy. In this sense, the NEP was not merely a 'retreat' dictated by solely Russian conditions, as Lenin insisted in the face of suspicious Western criticisms during the Third Congress and its aftermath.¹¹² Rather, it was an attempt at a practical application of the politics of the united front, or the attempt to build a class politics on a mass basis that confirmed the proletariat's capacity to transform the specificity of its allied social forces into a political power of a completely different type.

A close reading of the *Prison Notebooks* suggests that it was this meaning of the NEP that remained impressed upon Gramsci's memory over ten years later in a Fascist jail cell. For it was the year of the institution of the NEP (1921)

¹⁰⁹ Gramsci 1978, p. 440.

¹¹⁰ Lenin 1964, Volume 32, p. 456; trans. modified; cf. Paggi 1984, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Paggi 1984, p. 12.

¹¹² Lenin 1964, Volume 32, pp. 479–96.

that Gramsci signalled (a decade later) as a shift from the phase of 'war of movement' opened in March 1917 to a 'war of position' of (potentially) indefinite duration, beginning in March 1921.¹¹³ Although Gramsci's immediate reference is to 'Western' events ('Fascism'), the coincidence of these times was surely not 'coincidental'. As Buci-Glucksmann notes,

for Gramsci, the transition from war of movement to war of position was certainly by no means limited to a mere geographical distinction; East (Russia) and West. It very probably involved the strategy for socialism in the Soviet Union.¹¹⁴

6.2.7. NEP—united front—civil and political hegemony

The year 1921, however, not only witnessed the beginning of the NEP or the rise to power of Fascist counter-revolution. It was also the year in which the theses of the future united front were first formulated, in December, following upon the debates on organisation at the Third Congress of the International during the summer. As we have seen, they were fated for a difficult reception, particularly on the Italian *Sonderweg*. At the Fourth Congress, in 1922, reflecting on the reasons for this intransigence, Lenin argued that

at the Third Congress, in 1921, we adopted a resolution on the organisational structure of the Communist Parties and on the methods and content of their activities. The resolution is an excellent one, but it is almost entirely Russian, that is to say, everything in it is based on Russian conditions. This is its good point, but it is also its failing.¹¹⁵

What was required was a translation into Western vernaculars, a painstaking work of study, theoretical and practical, of the specificity of national social formations, within the internationalist perspective that had been made possible by the theoretical determinants revealed in the course of the Russian revolutionary process. The 'political' NEP to which Gramsci refers, that is, was the translation into Russian conditions of the imperative of the united front; but, equally, the deployment of the united front in the West would be successful only if it grasped the lessons of this concrete application of the thesis

¹¹³ Q 101, §9; *SPN*, p. 120.

¹¹⁴ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 187; cf. Paggi 1984, p. 11.

¹¹⁵ Lenin 1964, 33, p. 430; cf. *Kommunistische Internationale* 1923, pp. 229–30.

of the 'primacy of politics' and sought to come to terms with the specificity of national terrains. In late 1932, at the beginning of a section entitled 'Translation of Scientific and Philosophical Languages [*linguaggi*]' in his most 'philosophical' notebook (Notebook Eleven), Gramsci would recall Lenin's observation and elevate it into a theoretical canon for philosophical research.

In 1921 Ilich, in dealing with organisational questions, wrote and said (more or less) thus: we have not known how to 'translate' our language into the European languages.¹¹⁶

Two years earlier, in November-December 1930, Gramsci had also recalled Lenin's proposal in a related context. Lenin did not

have time to deepen his formula, though it should be borne in mind that he could only have expanded it theoretically, whereas the fundamental task was a national one, that is to say, it required a reconnaissance of the terrain and identification of the elements of trench and fortress represented by the elements of civil society.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, this, Gramsci argued, 'is what the formula of the "United Front" seems to me to mean'.¹¹⁸ In other words, the struggle for 'civil and political

¹¹⁶ Q 11, §46; *FSPN*, p. 306. In the immediately subsequent note, Gramsci outlines his theory of the philosophy of praxis as a rational and realistic translation of the 'philosophical novels' of other philosophical systems. In this perspective, the philosophy of praxis figures not as one philosophical system alongside others, but as their historicist explanation, or the 'real dialectic' that transforms speculative hypostatisations into their original terms of social relations. Cf. Sections 7.3. and 8.5. et sqq. 'The following problem must be resolved: whether the mutual translatability of the various philosophical and scientific languages is a "critical" element that belongs to every conception of the world or whether it belongs (in an organic way) just to the philosophy of praxis, being appropriable only in part by other philosophies? Translatability presupposes that a given stage of civilisation has a "basically" identical cultural expression, even if its language is historically different, being determined by the particular tradition of each national culture and each philosophical system, by the prevalence of an intellectual or practical activity etc. Thus it is to be seen whether one can translate between expressions of different stages of civilisation, in so far as each of these stages is a moment of the development of another, one thus mutually integrating the other, or whether a given expression may be translated using the terms of a previous stage of the same civilisation, a previous stage which however is more comprehensible than the given language etc. It seems that one may in fact say that only in the philosophy of praxis is the "translation" organic and profound, whilst from other standpoints it is often a simple game of generic "schematisms"' (Q 11, §47; *FSPN*, p. 307).

¹¹⁷ Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 238.

¹¹⁸ Q 7, §16; *SPN*, p. 237.

hegemony', the attempt to construct a proletarian hegemonic apparatus, was Gramsci's attempt to remain faithful to Lenin's last will and testament and to deploy this qualitative advance in the development of the concept of hegemony in Western conditions. Far from leading away from the classical thesis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Gramscian theory of proletarian hegemony posits itself as its necessary 'complement'. War of position is now not only the 'only possible' strategy in the West;¹¹⁹ as an application of the mass class-based politics of the united front, it has become the *sine qua non* of a revolutionary politics that wants to produce a politics 'of a very different type' on an international scale.

6.3. Actuality of the united front

Nothing would be easier at this stage than to agree that 'the central problematic of the united front—the final strategic advice of Lenin to the Western working-class movement before his death, the first concern of Gramsci in prison—retains all its validity today'.¹²⁰ Precisely what such an affirmation could mean in concrete terms in the contemporary conjuncture, however, is more difficult to determine. Despite the tragic failure of their (compromised) historical deployment (above all, in the German Revolution) and chauvinist deformation (in the nationalist and non-class based perspective of a 'popular front'), the principles of the united front have long constituted the only possible foundation for a realistic and responsible socialist politics, in East and West—even if more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. Yet the political terrain in most national formations has radically changed from the period in which Lenin and Gramsci focused upon strengthening the political relations between minoritarian working classes and majoritarian peasantries, even if such relations of 'dialectical paedagogy' now constitute, on an international terrain, one of the most important fronts of the contemporary struggle against the latest phase of capitalist globalisation. The soviet democracy in which the practice of civil and political hegemony was first essayed was tragically defeated from within by the rise of Stalinism in precisely the period in

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Anderson 1976a, p. 78.

which Gramsci and others sought to outline an alternative path of revolutionary continuation. Above all, the profound political defeat of the socialist movement in the twentieth century, the ongoing disaggregation of leftist organisational forms and the decomposition of traditional working-class identities and communities would seem to deprive a contemporary reproposal of the united front of the 'material forces' that, historically, were expected to be the agents of its realisation.

In this context, the value of a return to Gramsci's thought consists, in the first instance, in the distance it allows us to take from the paucity of the present and the forms in which it is often comprehended. It provides us with a way to reconnect to the decisive political experiences of the socialist movement in the twentieth century, as a necessary precondition for exploring the forms of its possible actualisation in our own times. As an 'unfinished' research programme and 'theoretical distillate' of the politics of the united front, the *Prison Notebooks* contain at least two perspectives that will be decisive for the re-emergence of any genuinely mass, class-based politics:

1. a permanent perspective on the integral unity of the capitalist state-form, its production of the 'political' in bourgeois society as a function of hegemonic relations, and the need to elaborate a proletarian hegemonic apparatus capable of challenging it with a power of 'a completely different type';
2. a novel reformulation of Marxism as a 'philosophy of praxis', as a theoretical formulation of the perspectives of the united front and as the expansive philosophical form at last discovered with which to construct proletarian hegemony, 'renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself'.¹²¹

In this perspective, the 'Gramscian moment' still confronts us today as our contemporary. In the following chapters, we will explore the challenges and opportunities it poses for the contemporary revitalisation of Marxism.

¹²¹ Q 4, §11; Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

Chapter Seven

‘The Philosophy of Praxis is the Absolute “Historicism”’

The expression ‘absolute historicism’ appears only three times in the *Prison Notebooks* of Antonio Gramsci. Its first appearance is in February–March 1932, in the first note Gramsci writes with the title ‘An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy’.¹ It appears for a second time a few months later, in July–August 1932, in ‘The Concept of “Orthodoxy”’. This is perhaps the best-known quotation, and the one which provided the point of departure for Althusser’s critique. It figures as a concluding formulation to an important additional passage in which Gramsci argues that

it has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression one should put the accent on the first term—‘historical’—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin. The philosophy of praxis is the absolute ‘historicism’, the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.²

¹ Q 8, §204.

² Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 465.

Its third and final appearance is almost a year later, in June–July 1933, in another ‘Introduction to the Study of Philosophy’, from a late and final phase of carceral researches.³ The context is a series of notes in which Gramsci attempts to summarise his reflections on the nature of the Italian *Risorgimento* and its relationship to the French Revolution. As in ‘The Concept of “Orthodoxy”’, the expression ‘absolute historicism’ is used as a description of one of the elements of the philosophy of praxis, and, in both of its final appearances, it is used as the conclusion to a previous argument. Although its importance is emphasised for a correct understanding of the philosophy of praxis, the expression itself is not subject to further explicit analysis or development. It appears like the tip of an iceberg, beneath which lies a conceptual structure and series of analyses and researches that remain largely implicit.

7.1. ‘The absolute “historicism”’

These three brief sightings, however, were enough to prompt Althusser to urge a fundamental change in direction of the entire Marxist research programme. The danger posed by the problematic made visible by Gramsci’s absolute historicism threatened nothing less than Marxism’s ability to provide accurate knowledge of the nature of capitalist society and to elaborate political projects aimed at abolishing it. In fact, all of the other elements of Althusser’s critique of Gramsci—his ‘Hegelianisation’ of the Marxist totality, his lack of concern for the scientificity of Marxism, his voluntarist humanism, his decommissioning of the philosophers—stemmed from this rejection of an historicist perspective, a rejection that, in turn, came to define the central theses of high Althusserianism negatively, as that which they were not.

Althusser’s alarm is all the more remarkable when one considers the fact that the concept of *absolute* historicism had not played a significant role in the earlier Italian reception of Gramsci. Gramsci’s *historicism* had indeed been emphasised and posited as the *Aufhebung*, in both senses of the term, of the Italian tradition of philosophical historicism dominated by the figure of Benedetto Croce. The qualifying adjective, however, had been implicitly treated as a merely rhetorical superlative. For Althusser, on the other hand, more emphasis

³ Q 15, §61.

needed to be placed upon the first rather than the second term, for it was precisely this that revealed the disguised Hegelian essence or 'hard core' of Gramsci's research programme. As an *absolute* historicism, it was homologous, in an historicist register, with Hegel's absolute knowledge. It figured as the moment of transparency and self-presence of the totality that gathered together all the preceding moments, organising them in a constellation adequate to their significance and annulling any cleavage between the subjective and objective realms. Just as knowledge finally realised (that is, understood, concretised and assumed) its place *in* the world as the truth and actuality *of* the world in the concluding paragraph of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, so Gramsci's absolute historicism, according to Althusser, posited itself as the finally attained consciousness of history which allowed the present to be fully contemporaneous with itself, embodied in the messianic figure of the proletariat. Thus characterised as a disguised Hegelianism in a period where Hegel's supposed *Ver-söhnung* with the existing order represented all that the militant movements of the 1960s sought to avoid, Gramsci's distinctive conception of the articulation of politics, history and the Marxist *Weltanschauung* seemed to be faced with no other option than quietly and politely to absent itself from future debates about the specificity of Marxist philosophy. As we have seen, this was in large measure precisely what happened in a number of the most significant Marxist cultures.

The central thesis of this chapter is that Gramsci's absolute historicism has a very different meaning from that which either Althusser or indeed even many more sympathetic commentators have ascribed to it. Rather than collapsing Marxism back into a poor man's Hegelianism, it is precisely the philosophy of praxis's status as an absolute historicism that most distinguishes it from all philosophies hitherto, 'an apex inaccessible to the enemy camp'.⁴ Despite appearing only three times, it has a precise sense in the discourse of the *Prison Notebooks*, serving to indicate a general orientation or *atteggiamento* within which all of the other dimensions of the philosophy of praxis become possible. More exactly, the philosophy of praxis's absolute historicism is the anti-metaphysical presupposition from which its capacity to be an absolute worldliness of thought and absolute humanism of history emerges; absent this central concept, or ascribe to it meanings different from that which it had

⁴ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 462.

for Gramsci, and these other positions of Gramsci can be easily dismissed as mere variations on themes well-known from the speculative traditions of Western philosophy. We will thus be concerned in this chapter to track the slow emergence of this concept in the *Prison Notebooks* until the moment of its explicit formulation. It will then be possible to consider its articulation with the other attributes of Gramsci's project before returning to consider their integral unity in the philosophy of praxis. Rather than the tip of an iceberg, absolute historicism will appear as a crossroads, opening up 'a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself'.⁵

7.1.1. Theory of history and historiography

From the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks*' project, Gramsci concerned himself with themes related to various traditions of 'historicism'. Indeed, a study of the 'theory of history and historiography' constitutes the first subject of the proposed study plan that he wrote on the first page of his first notebook on 8 February 1929. The subject had not occurred in Gramsci's first sketch of his study programme in a letter to Tania on 19 March 1927.⁶ It does appear, however, among the three arguments to which Gramsci declares that he will primarily dedicate his attention, in a letter of 25 March 1929, less than two months after the sixteen 'principal arguments' at the beginning of the *Prison Notebooks*.⁷ It is only a year later, however, in Notebook Four, that precisely what Gramsci means by 'theory of history and historiography' becomes clear: 'nothing other than a theoretical reflection on historical materialism' and its historical antecedents.⁸ Significantly, this is the first notebook with a section dedicated to philosophical questions, entitled 'Notes on Philosophy. Materialism and Idealism', written in the period between May and November of 1930.

Even more significantly, this was the same period in which Gramsci translated a series of Marx's texts, in Notebook Seven. The foremost among these, and the first texts that Gramsci translated, were the *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *Preface to the Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859. The complementary approaches that Gramsci detected in them, as we have seen,

⁵ Q 11, §27; SPN, p. 464.

⁶ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, pp. 82–5.

⁷ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, pp. 256–9. Cf. Frosini 2003, pp. 45–54.

⁸ Frosini 2003, p. 48.

refute those readings (e.g. Althusser and, in a different sense, Cohen) that have thought to find in the latter text intimations of the scientific analysis of *Capital* fundamentally foreign to the supposedly 'humanist' discourse of the former. On the contrary, Gramsci demonstrates that the 'philosophical' theses of the first text are thoroughly implicated in the political-historical narrative of the second, as two sides of the same coin or two dimensions of the same project.

These two texts became a central point of reference for all of Gramsci's researches, incessantly cited, recalled and implicitly presupposed in all of his own philosophical and historiographical concepts. He also translated shortly after, however, several other texts by Marx that support the thesis that Gramsci saw a direct link, and perhaps even substantial identity, between the first subject of his study plan and research into the nature of historical materialism as a form of thought: Chapter One of the *Communist Manifesto*, 'Bourgeois and Proletarians' (significantly, Gramsci entitled his translation 'Theory of History'), and a passage from *The Holy Family* on eighteenth-century French materialism.

The effects of these seemingly merely preparatory or even consolatory linguistic exercises can be noted immediately. Taking up Hegel's and Marx's famous remarks on the relations of 'correspondence',⁹ between the political practice of the French Revolution and the theoretical developments of German idealism, Gramsci seeks to outline a comprehensive theory of the emergence of modern historicisms, considered as a unified field even if traversed by significant differences. That is, he attempts to specify the features that unify both political-ideological formations and philosophical doctrines that had advanced, either implicitly or explicitly, under the aegis of historicism. Clearly, Gramsci understands by 'historicism' something much wider than the commonly accepted post-Popperian or post-Althusserian definitions. His initial point of reference is neither Hegel's grand narrative of the Golgotha of alienated Spirit returning to itself nor later traditions, descending from Mannheim and Dilthey, that were synthesised with phenomenological perspectives in Heidegger's concept of 'historicity'.¹⁰ Rather, Gramsci's primary concern is with the 'subterranean currents' of popular social and political movements that were only much later reflected and transformed by the systematic exposition of professional philosophers.

⁹ Q 8, §208.

¹⁰ Cf. Roth 1972, p. 62 et sqq.

7.1.2. The popular aspect of modern historicism

In the note ‘Two Aspects of Marxism’,¹¹ Gramsci argues that historical materialism can be considered, insofar as it is still undergoing a period of popularisation in the form of a materialism closely connected to the traditional world-views of the subaltern classes, as ‘the popular side of modern historicism’.¹² The elective genealogy that precedes this characterisation is particularly significant. It is structured around a series of complementary pairs, or dialectical poles of tension within which many of Gramsci’s general problematics and specific concepts are subsequently articulated.

Renaissance-Reformation—German philosophy—French Revolution—laicism [liberalism]—historicism—modern philosophy—historical materialism. Historical materialism is the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reform, in its dialectic of popular culture—high culture. It corresponds to the Reformation + the French Revolution, universality + politics; it is still going through the popular phase, it has even become ‘prejudice’ and ‘superstition’. Historical materialism, as it is, is the popular aspect of modern historicism.¹³

It is important to note that historical materialism is neither identified with any of the preceding cultural and philosophical formations, nor is it seen as descending from any particular formation or combination of them. Rather, it is characterised as the ‘the crowning point of this entire movement of intellectual and moral reform, in its dialectic of popular culture—high culture’; that it is, not a mere sum of these parts, and certainly not the *telos* of the preceding series. Rather, it is a moment in a movement of renovation whose emergence

¹¹ Q 4, §3; written in May 1930.

¹² This is the same note in which Gramsci formulates his thesis on the world-historical significance of the Marxist *Weltanschauung*, reformulating in the process the question of orthodoxy within Marxism that had been debated since its inception and had taken on a particular urgency in the years leading up to and immediately following Gramsci’s incarceration. We shall return to the question of these ‘two aspects’ of Marxism in a moment. For now, it is sufficient to note that Gramsci was concerned to demonstrate the historical movement that issued in a unified, qualitatively new form of thought that opened an ‘historical epoch’. Only by grasping the significance of this ‘Copernican revolution’ (as Althusser named it, in mimicry of Kant) would it be possible to measure the extent of, and the reasons for, its subsequent bifurcation.

¹³ Q 4, §3; cf. *SPN*, p. 396.

reveals, first, possible (sometimes hidden) affinities between what had previously appeared as disparate phenomena; and, second, a dialectic between the initiatives and experience of the subaltern classes (popular culture) and the established order (high culture). Its status in relation to these prior movements is more heuristic (in the sense of permitting a re-organised narrative of modernity) than it is synthetic (in the sense of providing a final annulment of contradictions between elements in teleological progression).

Not long after, in the note 'The Restoration and Historicism',¹⁴ Gramsci further specifies this historical perspective. Here he emphasises its specifically political determinations, as an ideological formation that attempted to comprehend the conditions of class struggle at a very particular moment. He argues that the confrontation of the different 'historicisms' that emerged from the experience of the French Revolution and the period of the Restoration produced their *Aufhebung* in the form of

a 'popular historicism' which criticises the petit-bourgeois ideology and the 'aristocratic' ideology, explaining both and explaining 'itself', which represents the *maximum* 'historicism', the total liberation from any 'ideologism', the real conquest of the historical world, that is, the beginning of a new original civilisation.¹⁵

Clearly, what Gramsci understands here by 'historicism' is nothing less than the thought of Marx and Engels, but considered from a very particular perspective. Gramsci does not, in the first instance, inscribe the materialist conception of history in the register of the history of philosophy (of the type Hegel-begat-Feuerbach-begat-Marx-begat-Marxism). Rather, he characterises its emergence as politically determined, the adoption of a distinct position on a *Kampfplatz* already occupied by other forces. As in the previously considered note, he characterises it as a 'popular' form of historicism—that is, a form of historicism distinguished by its close affiliation with the politics of the popular or subaltern classes, structurally or formally similar to the moment of ideological self-comprehension of other class forces (here, the petty bourgeoisie and the 'aristocracy'). What sets this 'popular historicism' apart from such 'ideologisms' for Gramsci, however, is its self-reflexive capacity to criticise and

¹⁴ Q 4, §24; written in May–August 1930; cf. Q 16, §9.

¹⁵ Q 4, §24; italics mine.

explain not only the political ‘conditions of possibility’ of its antagonists’ forms of thought, but also, crucially, its own. In order to demonstrate the meaning of this qualitatively new form of historicism, Gramsci declares, ‘it is necessary to study all these currents of thought in their concrete manifestations’:

1. as philosophical current
2. as historiographical current
3. as political current.¹⁶

Philosophy *sive* historiography *sive* politics: Gramsci’s triadic analytic optic aims to demonstrate an integral and not merely contingent unity between these three forms of articulation of the ‘historicist’ currents of the nineteenth century.

7.2. Two critiques: liquidation and dilution

The systematic pursuit of this study plan occurs immediately, particularly in the two great philosophical (and at the same time, directly political) confrontations which occupy Gramsci throughout the *Prison Notebooks*: Benedetto Croce’s attempted ‘liquidation’ of Marxism and the ‘dilution’ of Marxism which Gramsci argues is represented in Bukharin’s *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*. In the first place, these two distinct critiques are unified by their common motivation to defend and develop Labriola’s thesis that ‘Marxism is an independent and original philosophy’, against the ‘two-fold revision’ to which it had been subjected:¹⁷ on the one hand, a reversion to pre-Marxist (metaphysical) materialisms as philosophical foundations for working-class politics by the so-called Marxist ‘orthodoxy’ of the Second International; on the other, the absorption and domestication of insights gained from Marxism by leading representatives of bourgeois thought, leading to idealist deformations.¹⁸ In the second place, these critiques are also unified by the dialectical rhythm with which Gramsci develops themes in his engagement with one

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Q 4, §3.

¹⁸ Reference to the importance of Labriola constitutes one of the touchstones of Gramsci’s reflections concerning the philosophical nature of Marxism throughout the *Prison Notebooks* project. Cf. e.g. Q 3, §31; Q 8, §168; Q 8, §200; Q 11, §16; Q 11, §70; *SPN*, pp. 386–8; Q 16, §9; *SPN*, pp. 388–99.

thinker, and then transfers, or 'translates' them into the terms of his critique of the other, and vice versa. Although these critiques are developed in tandem, it is nevertheless still possible to detect distinct moments of critical attention focused upon each thinker. This is particularly the case with the 'historicist' components of each of these critiques. Thus, in Notebook Four, from the second half of 1930, Gramsci's comments on the theme of historicism are particularly directed against Bukharin.

7.2.1. Gramsci *contra* Bukharin ... and Diamat

It is worth emphasising that Gramsci's sometimes highly aggressive critique of Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*, one of the leading 'old guard' Bolsheviks, has nothing personal about it.¹⁹ Neither would personal aggression have been warranted: in 1927–8, Bukharin was in fact among those attempting to arrange an exchange of prisoners that would have freed him. Gramsci had used the same text that he criticises so forcefully and continuously in the *Prison Notebooks* in the party school he organised in 1925, even praising it as a necessary instrument for the transformation of raw working-class militants into disciplined revolutionary cadre.²⁰ Only a few years later, however, Bukharin's work seemed to Gramsci like a summary of precisely 'what should not be done'.²¹ Such a radical revision of assessment, as Frosini notes, 'responds to a very precise reason: Gramsci senses—and with reason—in Bukharin's theoretical structure a phenomenon that goes far beyond its author'.²² He argued that serious political dangers were succinctly encapsulated in this attempted systematisation of a 'theory' for Marxism.

It is a cruel irony that, despite Bukharin's factional defeat (and later, execution) by Stalin, the philosophical perspectives that Bukharin championed in *Historical Materialism* were later to become dominant within not only the Soviet Union but the international Communist movement as a whole, canonised

¹⁹ Cf. Frosini 2003, p. 105.

²⁰ For an analysis of the selected passage used by Gramsci in the party school in 1925, cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, pp. 201–2. Particularly significant is Gramsci's seemingly unproblematic acceptance in this period of Bukharin's opposition between bourgeois science and proletarian science, on the one hand, and idealist (finalist, religious) and materialist conceptions of the world, on the other.

²¹ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 202.

²² Frosini 2003, p. 105.

in the form of Stalinist 'Diamat'. It was a popularisation well positioned to enjoy an immediate diffusion in the workers' movement, as evidenced by the numerous editions and translations that rapidly followed its publication in 1921 (incidentally, coinciding with the end of Bukharin's 'left-communist' period and his rallying to the NEP). According to Gramsci, it connected with and in a certain sense ratified a spontaneous 'ideology' derived from the experience of subalternity. In the long term, however, Gramsci argued, its diffusion would be fatal for attempts to forge proletarian hegemony, for it encouraged the continuation of precisely the sort of subaltern perspectives with which a combative workers' movement needed to break, in order to be fit to assume social and political leadership. Gramsci's intention to outline an alternative conception of the role of 'theory' and 'philosophy' within the Marxist *Weltanschauung* in the *Prison Notebooks* thus derives from a fundamentally *political* motivation.

Gramsci argues that Bukharin had reduced the philosophical dimension of Marxism to a version of traditional, eighteenth-century vulgar materialism. Continuing influential tendencies from the Second International (and, in a certain sense, complicit with his contemporary rivals, Deborin's 'dialecticians'), Bukharin 'mechanist' position conceived (dialectical) 'materialism' as a 'first philosophy' of Marxism, a series of metaphysical propositions organised around the category of matter, upon which was then constructed a 'theory' of history (historical materialism) from which political analyses could be derived. In effect, Bukharin regarded the distinguishing philosophical feature of the Marxist tradition as its rejection of 'idealism' and concomitant endorsement of 'materialism', understood as a series of propositions about the 'givenness' of the world. Philosophy, history and politics remained externally related in such a conception. Such a 'first philosophy', according to Gramsci in October 1930, could not be 'other than eternal and absolute'.²³ History and politics could thus only figure as finitude, ultimately subordinated to the infinity represented in the laws and categories of their philosophical 'guarantee'. Bukharin did not comprehend, Gramsci argues, that

the essential part of Marxism lies in its sublation [*superamento*] of the old philosophies and also in the way of conceiving philosophy, and it is this that

²³ Q 4, §40; cf. Q 4, §25; Q 7, §47; Q 11, §62; *SPN*, pp. 404–7.

must be demonstrated and developed systematically. [...] in the expression 'historical materialism' major weight has been given to the second term, while it should be given to the first: Marx is essentially an 'historicist' etc.²⁴

The new way of practising philosophy consists not only in the historicist critique of the metaphysical tradition and the 'theoretical' explanation 'that any "truth" believed to be eternal and absolute has practical origins and has represented or represents a provisional value'. It also consists, equally if not more importantly, in the much more difficult task of making 'this interpretation understood "practically" regarding historical materialism itself'.²⁵

Gramsci holds that it is not sufficient for Marxism to subject other forms of thought to the scrutiny of ideology-critique, demonstrating their historical conditions of emergence, the class interests to which they give expression, the contradictions by which they are traversed and constituted and the partiality of their claims to 'truth'. It must also be able to apply such a demystifying critique to itself, providing an account of the historicity of its own propositions and descriptions. In other words, Marxism does not deflate the metaphysical pretensions of other systems of thought in order to inflate its own claims to an ahistorical validity. It is not a fratricidal coup in the throne room of speculation. On the contrary, it attempts to comprehend also its own historical determinateness, as an integral element of its own practice.

Gramsci acknowledges that such a perspective is hard to understand in moments of theoretical reflection, let alone in the thick of battle when ruminating indecisiveness can be fatal. A quotation from Goethe, seemingly casually inserted among other notes from Gramsci's wide reading in this period (November 1930), indicates the fundamental political problem that troubles him while he is developing this critique: how can a form of thought which has abandoned claims to absolute truth, and which acknowledges its own historical determination, still motivate the confident action necessary to found a new civilisation?

"History and Anti-History". 'There are few who at once have Thought and at the same time are capable of the deed. Thought expands, but lames; the deed animates, but narrows.' Goethe, *W. Meister* (VIII, 5).²⁶

²⁴ Q 4, §11; written in May–August 1930; cf. Q 11, §27; *SPN*, pp. 462–5.

²⁵ Q 4, §40.

²⁶ Q 4, §64.

Critique, it seems, is like drink, an ‘equivocator’, in the sense the immortal Porter declared to Macduff: ‘it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance’, it ‘persuades’ and simultaneously ‘disheartens’. This, it would seem, was the perspective that had prompted not just Bukharin but the main currents of Marxism from the Second International onwards to take refuge in variations on the notion of a metaphysical foundation for Marxism: the perceived need for Marxist theoreticians to provide the certainty upon which working-class militants—besieged by a sea of bourgeois ideologies structurally anchored in the current society that viscerally asserted its ‘eternal’ validity—could undertake political interventions, confident of their claims to a ‘truth’ that transcended its historical moment, pointing to a future classless society. ‘Relativising’ Marxism’s own truth-claims, it was suspected, could easily function as a camel’s nose in the tent, reducing the ability of the new *Weltanschauung* to inspire impassioned activity for its realisation. Gramsci registers the difficulty of the task; but despite these risks, he nevertheless insists that the abandonment of the obligation to apply the methods of an historical ideology-critique to Marxism itself as a form of thought inevitably entails a relapse into one or another form of pre-Marxian metaphysics, which could not be ‘other than eternal and absolute’.²⁷

Most significantly, as his critique develops, he increasingly insists that the perceived strength of such metaphysical guarantee is in fact symptomatic of a deeper, structural weakness of the working-class movement and its experience of subjugation: an orientation [*atteggiamento*] of passivity, unwittingly reproducing the experience of subjection to external forces (in the first instance, another class’s social and political hegemony) at the very heart of attempts to overcome such a condition. In October 1930, he notes that ‘practically [...] also historical materialism tends to become an ideology in the worst sense, that is, an absolute and eternal truth’.²⁸ In other words, the form of thought of the working-class movement tends (or more exactly, has tended) to submit to the subalternity of its social location, reproducing it mimetically in thought, rather than achieving critical domination of it. In the second version of this text, written roughly two years later, Gramsci prefaces this argument with the following important additions.

²⁷ Q 4, §40.

²⁸ Ibid.

It is still very difficult to make people grasp 'practically' that such an interpretation is valid also for the philosophy of praxis itself, without in so doing shaking the convictions that are necessary for action. This is, moreover, a difficulty that recurs for every historicist philosophy; it is taken advantage of by cheap polemicists (particularly Catholics) in order to contrast within the same individual the 'scientist' and the 'demagogue', the philosopher and the man of action etc, and to deduce that historicism leads necessarily to moral scepticism and depravity. From this difficulty arise many 'dramas' of conscience in little men, and in great men the 'Olympian' attitudes *à la* Wolfgang Goethe.²⁹

At this stage of his project, however, the *aporia* nevertheless remains. Its resolution will constitute one of the strongest impetuses for Gramsci's development of an integral concept of Marxism as the 'absolute historicism'.

7.2.2. An *Anti-Croce*

The critique of Croce's relation to historicism, on the other hand, intensifies towards the end of the first phase of Gramsci's researches, in Notebook Eight (from November 1931 to May 1932), both in the notes written before the third series of 'Notes on Philosophy' and in this section itself (though the intention to engage with the historical and political significance of Croce's thought, particularly as it developed after 1919, had already been explicitly announced in March 1930,³⁰ and implicitly pursued throughout the first notebook).³¹ The importance that Gramsci assigns to Croce throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, not merely as a leading figure of Italian cultural and political life but as a grand intellectual of European and international stature, may appear to some contemporary anglophone readers to be an arbitrary exaggeration, a projection of provincial concerns onto the world stage. Throughout the history of the reception of Gramsci's thought, particularly outside of Italy, his self-confessed youthful 'Croceanism'³² has often been met with puzzlement (if not outright

²⁹ Q 11, §62; *SPN*, p. 406; written between August 1932 and early 1933.

³⁰ Q 1, §132.

³¹ Cf. Frosini 2003, pp. 54–6.

³² As we will soon see, Gramsci's 'confession' in actual fact refers to something slightly different from a simple allegiance to a philosophical system in its entirety or in part, as has often been assumed by critics (perhaps due to the unstated assumption that

hostility).³³ In particular, Gramsci's assertion that 'just as Hegelianism had provided the premise for the philosophy of praxis in the nineteenth century, at the origins of present-day civilisation, so Crocean philosophy could offer the premise for a renewal of the philosophy of praxis in our times, for our generation',³⁴ has been regarded as, at best, a somewhat 'forced' comparison. At worst, it has been dismissed out of hand, particularly as Gramsci confesses immediately after that

the question was just touched on in passing, and even then in certainly a primitive and most certainly an inadequate way, since at the time the concept of the unity of theory and practice, of philosophy and politics, was still unclear to me and I was tendentially somewhat Crocean.³⁵

In the contemporary anglophone world, Croce is largely remembered, if at all, as the author of 'What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel', a text that disappoints the interest aroused by its title. In Italy itself, Croce is today more often almost ritualistically invoked rather than seriously studied, as either a chief representative of the weakest elements of traditional Italian intellectual culture (its 'historicism', 'humanism', 'idealism', the weak implantation of modern scientific methods and so forth) or champion of a distinctive brand of Italian liberalism. Gramsci's extensive engagement with Croce in the *Prison Notebooks* would appear to have been merely his own idiosyncratic overestimation of the world-historic importance of a passing phenomenon, or a concession to his own cultural-intellectual formation.

the Gramsci-Croce relationship can be modelled on a particular understanding of the Marx-Hegel relationship). In general, the influence of Croce on Gramsci's thought has often been exaggerated, within Italy just as often as without—or at least, the particular modality of Croce's influence has been misapprehended. For a detailed discussion of Gramsci's relationship to Croce, see the two essential studies of Domenico Losurdo 1987 and 1997. Cf. also Frosini 2003, pp. 54–6; pp. 123–49, which provides an essential corrective to many previous discussions of the status of Croce in the architecture of the *Prison Notebooks*.

³³ As we have seen, such a tendency was strongly present in 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci'. Anderson's companion study from the same period, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), outlines a general theoretical perspective on such 'pre-Marxist' residues in Gramsci and other figures of 'Western Marxism', assimilating Gramsci's engagement with Croce to a more general Western-Marxist retreat to speculative themes in the face of Stalinism.

³⁴ Q 101, § 11; *FSPN*, p. 355.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Yet Gramsci's assessment of Croce was not as wilful or provincial as it may at first sight appear. Croce was one of the major intellectuals of his time, on a European scale, producing important texts in logic, ethics, aesthetics, literary criticism and history, historiography, history, political theory, countless interventions in contemporary culture and politics and even collections of Neapolitan 'folklore'. He founded, with Gentile, *La Critica*, one of the foremost intellectual journals of the early twentieth century, and, with his editorial collaboration with the publishing house Laterza, he shaped an 'infrastructure' of Italian culture that arguably remains operative to this day. Neither was Croce's influence confined to the ivory tower, as such prodigious productivity might lead one to suspect; independently wealthy, he in fact never held a university post, co-ordinating his extramural activities for a significant period from his home base under the shadow of the bell tower of Santa Chiara in Naples. Appointed senator for life in 1910 and involved in planning significant educational reforms as Minister of Public Instruction in 1920–1, he remained officially a member of the state apparatus throughout the Fascist period, despite his withdrawal from public life and open opposition to Mussolini's régime (after 1925, when he felt that Fascism had outlived its usefulness as a strong hand against the Left).³⁶

We should pause, however, before progressing to the (pre-) judgement that this neo-Hegelian was a conservative or even reactionary figure in the mould commonly and incorrectly ascribed to his master. Croce's thought had initially been formed at the end of the last great flowering of Hegelianism on a European scale, in post-*Risorgimento* Naples, passing through the Spaventa brothers and Labriola, Croce's 'maestro' and one-time collaborator, and finally arriving at Croce himself (and, perhaps just as significantly, Gentile).³⁷ In a very real sense, it represented, as Gramsci argued, 'the world-wide moment of classical German philosophy',³⁸ undertaking a creative revival and extension of a form of thought that not long before, it will be remembered, had been confidently treated as a 'dead dog'.³⁹

³⁶ For an overview of Croce's thought, cf. Finocchiaro 1988.

³⁷ The most comprehensive account of this fertile movement, locating it in its Italian and European intellectual and political contexts, is Losurdo 1987.

³⁸ Q 101, § 11; *FSPN*, p. 356.

³⁹ It was not only the *Epigono* of Marx's day, who prompted him to 'flirt' with Hegelian phraseology in Volume One of *Capital*, who dismissed Hegel in the crudest

Quite apart from its strengths and weaknesses as an interpretation and attempted revision of Hegel's thought, this neo-idealist culture had a precise political significance in the Italy of the time: to be *pro* Hegel was to be against *il Sillabo*, that is, against all the archaic forms of domination that resisted the road to modernity represented by the pro-*Risorgimento* forces (and even more significantly, by the left wing of that movement). As Losurdo notes,

taking a position in favour of Hegel [...] is therefore taking a position in favour of the modern and, in terms of Italy, taking a position in favour of the *Risorgimento* which had meant the overthrowing of the old regime, the beginning of a modern national State and the defeat of a clearly still premodern State of the Church.⁴⁰

Croce and the intellectual-cultural movement from which he emerged continued to play a progressive role in Italian culture after the turn of the century (albeit an increasingly contradictory one, as the contradictions of the social order that remained its horizon became more manifest from World War I onwards). Indeed, it could even be argued that some of the elements and presuppositions of the neo-idealist culture represented superior positions in comparison with the early contradictions of an Italian socialist movement still searching for political clarity and national unity.⁴¹ Gramsci's youthful 'tendential Croceanism', therefore, involved less an allegiance to neo-idealism itself than a recognition that by engaging with its perspectives, considered as a 'movement of moral and intellectual reform' rather than merely a

fashion. Despite Marx's and Engels's late reassertion of the immense fecundity of Hegel's thought, infant German Social Democracy was not immunised against such rash prejudices. Thus Liebknecht felt authorised to append an editorial note to an article by Engels, without authorisation from the same, that glossed Hegel as 'discoverer and celebrator of the royally Prussian idea of the State' (cf. *MEW* 32, p. 501 and p. 503; for a commentary on the political significance of this position, cf. Losurdo 1997, p. 32).

⁴⁰ Losurdo 1997, p. 19.

⁴¹ See Losurdo 1997, pp. 22–3, particularly regarding neo-idealist positions on 'la questione del Mezzogiorno' and World War I. Losurdo's central thesis is that Gramsci's thought undergoes an evolution from critical engagement with Italian liberalism (particularly with Croce and Gentile) and, under the pressure of international and Italian political events (the experience of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism, and the response of liberalism itself to these events), evolves into a position Losurdo describes as 'critical communism'.

philosophical system or school,⁴² he might be able to gain critical vantage points on the real political and social problems of the subaltern classes.⁴³

7.2.3. Post-Marxism '*avant la lettre*'

There was a further reason why Gramsci regarded the critique of Croce as of such high importance, of particular significance for the *Prison Notebooks*' analysis of traditions of historicism and their relation to Marxism. Southern-Italian

⁴² As Gramsci himself described the neo-idealist movement in a letter to Tania on 17 August 1931; cf. Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 54–7.

⁴³ This was in fact Gramsci's meaning when he referred retrospectively in 1932 to his position in early 1917 as 'tendentially Crocean'. The full passage in the *Prison Notebooks* is highly significant for understanding Gramsci's depiction of Croce's thought as representing 'the world-wide moment of classical German philosophy'. It reads as follows: 'In February 1917 in a brief introduction to a republication of an essay of Croce's, "Religion and Peace of Mind" (cf. *The Conduct of Life*, pp. 27–33), which had then only recently come out in *La Critica*, I wrote that just as Hegelianism had provided the premise for the philosophy of praxis in the Nineteenth century, at the origins of present-day civilisation, so Crocean philosophy could offer the premise for a renewal of the philosophy of praxis in our times, for our generations. The question was just touched on in passing, and even then in certainly a primitive and most certainly an inadequate way, since at the time the concept of the unity of theory and practice, of philosophy and politics, was still unclear to me and I was tendentially somewhat Crocean. But now, even though the maturity and capacity necessary for the undertaking may be lacking, it is in my view worthwhile looking afresh at the position and putting it forward in a critically more developed form. In other words Croce's philosophical conception has to be adapted in the way that Hegel's was by the first theorists of the philosophy of praxis. This is the sole historically fruitful way of carrying through an adequate renewal of the philosophy of praxis, of raising this conception—which due to the necessities of day-to-day practical life has been getting "vulgarised"—to the heights it must reach for the solution of the more complex tasks demanded by the current development of the struggle. That is to say it must be elevated to the level of creating a new integral culture, having the mass characteristics of the Protestant Reformation and the French Enlightenment at the same time as having the classicism of Greek and Italian Renaissance culture: in the words of Carducci, a culture which synthesises Maximilien Robespierre and Immanuel Kant, politics and philosophy in a dialectical unity intrinsic to a social group that is not just French or German but European and world-wide. We must not only draw up an inventory of what we have inherited from classical German philosophy but bring it back into operative life, to do which we have to come to terms with Crocean philosophy. Putting it in other words, for us as Italians to be the heirs of classical German philosophy means that we must be the heirs to Crocean philosophy, which at the present time represents the world-wide moment of classical German philosophy' (Q 101, § 11; *FSPN*, pp. 355–6). Gramsci seems to be reflecting upon his own evolution when he writes soon after: 'In Crocean language one can say that the religion of liberty is opposed to the religion of the Syllabus, which refuses modern civilisation *tout court*; the philosophy of praxis is a "heresy" of the religion of liberty since it was born on the self-same terrain of modern civilisation' (Q 101, § 13; *FSPN*, pp. 360–1).

Hegelianism, in the figure of Antonio Labriola, had eventually progressed to the elaboration of a distinctive interpretation of the materialist conception of history, in the same period that the first Marxist 'orthodoxy' was being consolidated in the ranks of German Social Democracy. Fittingly, for a thinker whose own intellectual biography closely corresponded to those of the founders of historical materialism, Labriola stressed the philosophical dimensions of their thought and attempted to elaborate it as a philosophy of praxis.⁴⁴ Croce had initially participated in this research project enthusiastically, only later to turn his back on what he claimed were the metaphysical pretensions of Marxism, while openly admitting to having incorporated into his mature practice the more rational 'residues' of his youthful excesses (which, however, he patronisingly held to be of limited and non-theoretical value).

From Marxism, properly so-called, [...] I obtained nothing theoretically, because its value was pragmatic and not scientific, and scientifically it offered only a pseudo-economics, a pseudo-philosophy and a pseudo-history.⁴⁵

Unlike some of his latter-day avatars, Croce was not content to dissolve Marxism into an ultimately teleological narrative of philosophical superannuation, or to replace its 'regional distortions' (economism) by another, equally regional and perhaps more provincial focus (for example, Laclau's and Mouffe's turn to one version of discourse theory). More combatively, he attacked it root and branch, thundering against Marxism's 'dogmatism', its metaphysical disregard for empirical variation, its partisan teleology and totalising perspective. Furthermore—and, here, the 'classicism' of Croce in comparison to the self-proclaimed novelty of later schools becomes apparent—he contested Marx-

⁴⁴ The first time that Labriola called historical materialism a 'philosophy of praxis' was in his correspondence with Sorel, collected in *Socialism and Philosophy* (Labriola 1980).

⁴⁵ Croce 1968, p. 291. Gramsci continually interrogated the terms of Croce's confession of apostasy and attempted reduction of the philosophy of praxis to a 'canon of historiography'. In particular, he rejected Croce's claim that his Marxist youth had left only 'residues' in his thought, arguing that such remainders in fact constituted the centre of his subsequent efforts. Furthermore, it was the Marxist elements, albeit idealistically deformed, already within Croce's thought that permitted Gramsci to argue that the philosophy of praxis could be furthered by engaging seriously with his propositions. In other words, Gramsci understood Croce's thought not as external to Marxism properly understood (as Anderson and others have suggested), but as a deformed moment internal to the Marxist paradigm, standing on its head and needing to be placed the right way up.

ism's claims to be the legitimate philosophical heir of Hegelianism by elaborating his own 'rational' purification of Hegel's theological-metaphysical errors. When Gramsci confronted Croce, he was thus not engaging a 'merely' bourgeois theorist temperamentally opposed to Marxism; rather, he was combating one of the earliest and most sophisticated proponents of a 'post-Marxism', whose critique needed to be answered both theoretically *and* practically.

However, the Croce with whom Gramsci engages throughout the *Prison Notebooks* is not only the former student of Labriola who modestly announced in *Historical Materialism and Marxist Economics* the death of Italian theoretical Marxism to be contemporaneous with his own apostasy; nor is it merely the critic of Hegel who proposed to replace a dialectic of opposites with a dialectic of 'distincts'; nor is it, in any simple sense, Croce the cultural organiser and gentleman scholar, influential figure on the Italian cultural scene. Rather, it is also the public figure of national and European importance that emerged from these previous phases of philosophical development, a 'secular Pope' promulgating a 'religion of freedom',⁴⁶ explicitly counterposed to Marxism. As Frosini notes, here we are confronted not merely with the 'great intellectual', but also 'the philosopher-ideologist'.⁴⁷

Conjunctural considerations had played an important role in determining this focus. Gramsci announced his intention to study systematically Croce's *Theory and History of Historiography*, particularly insofar as it represented, according to Gramsci, an implicit and perhaps even unconscious 'revision' of Croce's previously elaborated system. Frosini argues that *Theory and History of Historiography*

marks the point of division between the first and the second phase of Croce's thought, between the phase that we can define as systematic, in which Croce is above all concerned to fix the distinctions—as transcendental moments of the life of Spirit—in their reciprocal autonomy and connection, and the phase that was defined as 'historical' or even 'moralistic', in which the liberal philosopher, confronted by the crumbling of social unity first with the war, then with workers' insurrections and the Soviet revolution and further with Fascism, takes up a position openly in favour of liberalism and, with the concept of 'ethico-political history', provides a veritable arsenal (or, as he

⁴⁶ Q 7, § 17; Q 10II, § 41iv; *FSPN*, p. 475.

⁴⁷ Frosini 2003, p. 52.

will define it in 1929, a 'war horse') against historical materialism, which he held (obviously, after 1917) to be the most dangerous enemy of liberal civilisation.⁴⁸

Croce's latest 'theoretical' work and its concretisation in history studies thus had a fundamentally political motivation. Gramsci proposes to respond in kind, providing a symptomatic reading of the contradictions in Croce's prior thought revealed by the new *prise de position*.

7.2.4. History of freedom

In Notebook Eight, Gramsci condemns Croce's reputation as the practitioner of 'an objective science, of serene, impartial thought',⁴⁹ and highlights the similarity between his (historiographical) historicism and the traditions of (political-ideological) historicism which emerged during the experience of the Italian *Risorgimento* (understood in terms of the concept of 'passive revolution').⁵⁰ Both were committed to an abstract and symmetrical view in which history progresses according to a 'dialectic of conservation and innovation'.⁵¹ Doctrines, such as those of the Jacobin moment of modern culture, which proposed not the preservation of elements of the past according to a progressively unfolding preordained plan, but the introduction of new elements and the dislocation of certainties under the pressure of actual historical practice, were declared to be 'irrational'. Thus Croce's *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* excludes, because it cannot comprehend them as anything but anti-historical, the moments of force and dislocation which founded the new order: the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.⁵² In modern parlance, Croce was an advocate of a version of the 'short' nineteenth century. Similarly, his *History of Italy 1871–1915* conspicuously begins after the period of struggles and revolts of the *Risorgimento* that had founded the modern Italian nation state. *Im Anfang war der Staat* [in the beginning was the State] could well be taken as the motto of a purportedly non-reductive account of the empirical richness of modern life in all of its articulations, particularly those of civil society.

⁴⁸ Frosini 2003, pp. 53–4.

⁴⁹ Q 8, §39; written in February 1932.

⁵⁰ Cf. Q 8, §39; Q 101, §6; *FSPN*, pp. 341–3.

⁵¹ Q 8, §27; January 1932.

⁵² Q 8, §236.

Despite his claims of 'a disinterested contemplation of the eternal becoming of human history',⁵³ Croce's historicism is argued to be, in a repetition of the historicisms of the Italian *Risorgimento*, an

'ideology', of unilateral practico-political tendency, that cannot establish a science. Presenting this choice as 'science' is precisely the ideological element, because every ideology tries to present itself as science, and as philosophy.⁵⁴

A few months later (April–May 1932), Gramsci comes to call it a 'speculative', 'liberal' utopia whose fear of mass movements banishes revolutionary politics to the irrational and anti-historical,⁵⁵ and makes Fascist reaction incomprehensible as anything but a temporary aberration in an otherwise pacific evolutionary development. Rather than 'an ethico-political history', as Croce claimed, Gramsci argues that he has instead produced 'a speculative history'.⁵⁶

Having identified the political bias at the heart of the historicism of Croce's historiographical writings, Gramsci was now in a position to

conduct a properly theoretical research on his thought, that is, on the philosophical presuppositions that made possible the proposal (and self-representation) of that intellectual figure.⁵⁷

He finds the same philosophical and political contradictions at work in Croce's (philosophical) historicism as those that dominated his historiography. Significantly, this engagement occurs after Gramsci has translated the *Theses on Feuerbach* (the version edited by Engels) in the pages reserved for translations at the beginning of Notebook Seven—according to Francioni and Frosini, most probably undertaken at the same time as Gramsci writes the first 'Notes on Philosophy' in Notebook Four, between May and November 1930.⁵⁸ Armed with a positive conception of a way of practising philosophy that recognises the 'this-sidedness [*Diesseitigkeit*] of thought',⁵⁹ he has begun to develop the notion of the distinctive features, or attributes, of a 'philosophy of praxis'.⁶⁰ Croce's

⁵³ Q 8, §39.

⁵⁴ Q 8, §27; January–February 1932.

⁵⁵ Q 101, §6; *FSPN*, pp. 341–3.

⁵⁶ Q 8, §240; May 1932.

⁵⁷ Frosini 2003, p. 52.

⁵⁸ Cf. Francioni 1984, p. 38; Frosini 2003, p. 49.

⁵⁹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 3.

⁶⁰ As previously noted, the term itself appears for the first time in relation to historical

latter day positions are found to be not merely coincidental, a compromise with the changing needs of the conjuncture that are, strictly taken in the sense in which Marx argued regarding some young Hegelian interpretations of their master in his doctoral dissertation, ‘inessential’.⁶¹ On the contrary, although they represent, according to Gramsci, a ‘revision’ of his earlier system, they are more a revision that *eliminates* rather than *introduces* contradictions internal to his thought. At the same time, they *intensify* the contradiction between Croce’s philosophical presuppositions and the reality he seeks to comprehend by means of them.

7.2.5. Reform or destruction of the dialectic?

The early post-Marxist Croce had argued that all metaphysics was to be expunged from philosophy, presenting his thought as a revision of the Hegelian system, an *Aufhebung* of its internal contradictions. Viewed from one perspective, Croce’s ‘reform’ of the Hegelian dialectic represents a radicalisation of the totalising and ‘totalitarian’ dimensions that are thought to lie at the foundation of Hegel’s central category of *Spirit*. Hegelian *Geist* aspires to be omniscient, but it is continually fractured by the phases of self-alienation it must undertake in order to maintain itself as itself, defined by a dialectic of self-presence and self-absence. Croce’s *Spirito*, on the other hand, is always and everywhere identical with itself, completely present in the world as Spirit at any one moment. In this sense, it is Croce’s thought, and not that of Hegel himself, which most closely corresponds to the comic-book caricature of Hegel, as the archetype of the ‘idealist’ thinker of a suitably vague neo-Platonic vintage, who accords full reality only to an ideal of which the empirical world is a mere emanation.

As we shall see, much of Althusser’s critique of Gramsci’s historicism—in particular, its supposed reduction of all instances of the social whole to uniform emanations of an ‘essence’—is more properly directed at Croce’s model of the interrelation of the different elements of social reality (dubbed a ‘dialectic of distincts’ by Gramsci, following a Gentilean interpretation). Althusser’s

materialism, and in particular, the theory and practice of hegemony, in ‘Materialism and Historical Materialism’ (Q 7, §35; *SPN*, p. 357).

⁶¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 1, p. 391.

mistake was to suppose that Gramsci had remained in thrall to Croce's system on precisely this point, when he had in fact explicitly confronted it and subjected it to critique for reasons not dissimilar to those that motivated the critique of *Reading 'Capital'*.

However, if Gramsci's thought is fundamentally distinct from Croce's on precisely this issue of how to 'reform' the Hegelian dialect and the concept of the social totality that derives from it, this is arguably not the case with the results of Althusser's critique, that is, the theoretical structure of 'high' Althusserianism. Ironically, it is perhaps the early Althusser's structuralist model of the interrelationship between social practices that comes closest to reproducing Crocean presuppositions within Marxism, as we will see. Althusser's critique of Gramsci's purportedly 'emanationist' historicism might therefore be read as an unwitting self-critique, once the 'synchronic' presuppositions of Croce's thought are recognised.

Viewed from another, more fundamental, perspective, however, 'Croce's critique of Hegel's dialectic', as Coassin-Spiegel points out, 'represents its total destruction'.⁶² Croce's 'anti-Hegelian Hegelianism', according to Coassin-Spiegel, consists in his rejection of Hegel's concept of contradiction as 'radical oppositeness [*radikale Gegensätzlichkeit*]' and preference for a concept of 'distinction'.⁶³ According to Croce, Spirit articulates itself not by means of oppositions between incompatible elements (incompatible because historical development sets them against each other as mortal antagonists, coming *nacheinander*), but through the distinction between different but nevertheless commensurable instances (conceived as a combinatory of elements *nebeneinander* defined in contradistinction to each other, such distinction mutually implicating and thereby uniting them in the higher form of Spirit). Furthermore, Croce's system presents such a dialectic of 'distinctions' as the true—hitherto unrecognised, even by Hegel himself—foundation of Hegel's dialectic. For Croce, distinction precedes opposition, which is thereby revealed to be merely a 'metaphysical' comprehension of the former. The notion of opposition is premised, according to Croce, on a metaphysical dualism in which Spirit slowly 'realises' itself, one realised form opposing and attempting to replace the next. Viewed from the perspective of what Croce calls the true *philosophia*

⁶² Coassin-Spiegel 1997, p. 39.

⁶³ Ibid.

perennis, however, these different moments are compatible insofar as Spirit is fully present in each; they thus represent merely different levels of comprehension of the same 'immanent' Spirit, not states of finitude that Spirit's infinity cannot tolerate and must therefore abolish in higher, more richly articulated finite forms. It was for this reason that Croce argued his thought was a reform or purification of Hegelianism, purging it of its latent metaphysical dualism, in the sense of an immanent critique that explained and corrected, in a purportedly Hegelian way, Hegel's thought itself.

Arguably, however, it is not merely Croce's rejection of Hegel's concept of opposition that makes his intended reform an actual destruction. Rather, it is his negation of the underlying conceptuality from which opposition in Hegel emerges. Coassin-Spiegel's emphasis upon *Gegensätzlichkeit* risks implicitly positing an 'achronic conceptuality' that ironically owes not a little to interpretations of Hegel of which Croce's is the most coherent elaboration. The distinguishing feature of Hegel's concept of contradiction is not merely that it presupposes an antagonistic (and thus genuinely contradictory, rather than merely antinomic) relationship between elements in any given *Konstellation*. Rather, it is the particular way in which Hegel argues contradictions emerge and are resolved, however provisionally. In Hegel's thought, contradiction is conceptually subordinated to, and emerges from, 'historicist' presuppositions. It involves not merely synchronic opposition but also, crucially, diachronic clash i.e. contradictions must be real (as opposed to merely conceptual) oppositions for Hegel, because they are historically determined to 'fight a battle to the death' in order to assert their own contemporaneity over and against those from a previous, or emerging, phase of Spirit's journey. In other words, Hegel's fully developed concept of contradiction involves the emergence of *discordia* in the course of, and as a result of, development. In terms that Gramsci approvingly quoted, it gives rise to a *concordia discors* rather than *coincidentia oppositorum*.⁶⁴ Elements that had been assigned their place in a pacific synthesis are soon subject to dislocation and a growing antagonism between them as their interrelationships are played out on a terrain that is constituted historically, even in its contemporary 'givenness'.

Here lies the 'hard core' of Croce's *Aufhebung* of Hegel's thought. For Croce explicitly rejects the possibility of any historical narrative of the emergence and

⁶⁴ Cf. *Q* 1011, §4; *FSPN*, pp. 371–2.

elaboration of Spirit, as an oscillating dialectic of (self-) alienation and return to self via comprehension of an ever more richly articulated totality. For Hegel, infinite Spirit develops by means of an historical progression through different phases in which it alienates itself in partial, finite forms, in order to return to itself enriched. Its infinitude, that is, is guaranteed by its capacity to traverse the harrying negativity of the finite; the infinite is a moment internal—that is, immanent—to the finite. For Croce, on the other hand, such a conception presupposes a metaphysical dualism that would limit the capacity of Spirit to be absolutely 'immanent' to the world. As Frosini argues, in Croce's system,

Spirit does not have, because it cannot tolerate, anything exterior to itself. It is thus always perfect and complete in each of its particular forms, in each of its incarnations. These are thus not really 'sublated' in others, but they articulate and connect historically, always conserving however their own autonomy and perfection in themselves. This is possible because the level of history is one thing and that of logic is another. Struggle and opposition take place on the first, but it is not ever such as to co-involve the categories themselves that render such struggle comprehensible. The struggle between forms of life and within each one of these does not amount to the logical sublation of one phase of Spirit by another, but in each particular moment, whatever the empirical reality represented by it, all of Spirit is contained [...] in all of its forms, which can thus re-emerge in any moment. [...] Spirit is always whole in any expression. Thus, any of these is contemporarily itself and all the others, or better: it can be all the others because (and only because) it is, fundamentally and *distinctly*, itself.⁶⁵

7.2.6. Croce's absolute historicism

Croce had nevertheless declared that his philosophy of Spirit represented an 'absolute historicism', in a very specific sense, as the finally revealed truth of the philosophical tradition. 'Philosophy cannot be anything but, nor in reality has it ever been anything but, philosophy of Spirit', he argued.⁶⁶ He immediately refused any metaphysical or 'dual-world' interpretation of this

⁶⁵ Frosini 2003, pp. 126–7.

⁶⁶ Croce 1991, p. 9.

claim, in accordance with his claim of Spirit's absolute immanence in the world, as the totality of its elements. Instead, he asserted that

the philosophy of Spirit cannot be concretely, or has not every been in effect, if not as historical thought or historiography, in which process it represents the moment (which is also historically conditioned) of methodological reflection.⁶⁷

He concluded that

the reduction of *didascalica filosofica* to a 'methodology of history' [...] closes the way to a possible metaphysical misunderstanding of the philosophy of Spirit and of the same absolute spiritualism, and confers on this the most fitting name of 'absolute historicism'.⁶⁸

Croce thus argued that there was an immanent unity of philosophy and history, and that his philosophy was the first to recognise fully philosophy's constitution as the thought of history, and not the thought of some beyond.

However, as we have seen, these 'methodological' claims are directly contradicted by Croce's 'logical' presuppositions. Croce rigorously distinguishes between the 'real' concepts of logic and what he describes as the 'pseudo-concepts' implicit in practical life.⁶⁹ Concepts are given in thought *qua* thought, as a 'higher', speculative form of knowledge of the Real, purified of practical distractions.

The concept, therefore, is not representation, nor is it a practical mish-mash or condensation of representations. It arises from representations as something that is implicit in them and has to make itself explicit, as need or problem of which the representations pose the premises but which they are not able to satisfy and cannot even formulate. Satisfaction is given by the form no longer merely representative but logical of knowledge; and this perpetually is effected, in every instant of the life of Spirit.⁷⁰

The true concept for Croce is thus universal and goes beyond any of the particular instances that it comprehends.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Croce 1991, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Croce 1967, p. 14 et sqq.

⁷⁰ Croce 1967, p. 13.

A true and genuine concept, precisely because it is not representation, cannot have as its content a single representative element, nor can it refer itself to this or that particular representation or this or that group of representations; on the other hand, however, precisely because it is universal with respect to the individual of the representations, it refers to all and each of them together.⁷¹

In the terms of the early Althusser's project (who, once again, in fact comes dangerously close to reproducing Croce's epistemology and practice of concept-formation with his ahistorical definitions of science, theoretical practice and the thought-object), the concept (theory) emerges from representations (ideology) as their critique, offering the only genuine form of knowledge as opposed to the lived relations reflected by its antecedents. Insofar as knowledge is constituted only in the concept (in theory), it is autonomous and possesses its own temporality, which is not the same as that of those things that it comprehends. Metaphysics is here restored at the very moment it is denied; thought can at best reflect history in the sense of a *speculum* (more or less accurately, depending upon the 'purity' of the concept), but it cannot participate in it and its fundamental 'logical' structure is not altered by it.

Thus, according to Gramsci, Croce had in fact thrown the historicist baby out and kept the speculative-metaphysical bath water. Deprived of any theory of historical progression (and regression), Croce's absolutisation of history and its identification with Spirit resulted in little more than a bland positivism for which, following Marx's critique of Hugo, '*Everything existing serves [...] as an authority, every authority serves [...] as an argument*'.⁷² As we have seen, this perspective was powerfully at work in Croce's historical writings. In a note entitled 'Theology—Metaphysics—Speculation',⁷³ Gramsci argues that, despite Croce's claim to have attempted 'to have sought to "expel" from the field of philosophy any residue of theology and metaphysics, up to the point of negating any philosophical "system"', his thought remains essentially speculative and within the problematic of theology and metaphysics. 'But isn't any "speculative" philosophy itself a theology and a metaphysics?', Gramsci

⁷¹ Croce 1967, pp. 14–15.

⁷² Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 1, p. 204.

⁷³ Q 8, §224.

asks. In terms remarkably similar to Althusser's insistence that 'the knowledge of history is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet', Gramsci argues that, in Croce,

this 'residue' isn't a 'residue', it is a 'whole', it is the whole method of philosophising, and thus any affirmation of 'historicism' is vain, because it is a speculative 'historicism', the 'concept' of history and not history.⁷⁴

The significance of this critique cannot be overestimated: Gramsci is here criticising Croce for exactly the same failing that Croce had argued fundamentally disabled both Hegel's and Marx's thought: the determination of the finite by an infinitude that precedes and stands over it. Croce's frenetic flight from (Hegelian) metaphysics had been merely an exercise in rhetorical prodigality; unbeknownst to him (for his historicism could not comprehend the historicity of thought itself, its categories and forms, including that form of it known as 'historicism'), he had always already affirmed a fundamentally metaphysical structure of thought, even and especially while he thought to negate it.

7.2.7. Gramsci's absolute historicism: a first approach

It is in this context that the expression 'absolute historicism' appears for the first time, as a subject for further investigation, in the first note entitled 'An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy'.⁷⁵ This note provides a short resumé of philosophical themes, questions and hypotheses, some of which Gramsci had previously explored in his first two series of notes on philosophy (in Notebooks Four and Seven). Much more importantly, they later become central themes in his most intensive philosophical explorations, the 'special' Notebooks Ten and Eleven. The 'regroupings of material' at the beginning of Notebook Eight was the first time that Gramsci had mentioned the project of compiling an introduction to philosophy, alongside 'critical notes on a popular essay of sociology' (i.e. Bukharin's *Historical Materialism*). Here, he

⁷⁴ Q 8, §224. 'We must have no illusions as to the incredible power of this prejudice, which still dominates us all, which is the basis for contemporary historicism and which would have us confuse the object of knowledge with the real object by attributing to the object of knowledge the same "qualities" as the real object of which it is the knowledge. The knowledge of history is no more historical than the knowledge of sugar is sweet' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 106).

⁷⁵ Q 8, §204; written in February–March 1932.

begins to cash in the first part of this promissory note. Written towards the end of Gramsci's first phase of work (between February and March 1932, just before the commencement of Notebook Ten in April), this note thus signals a decisive turning point in the explicitly philosophical research of the *Prison Notebooks*. Earlier, Gramsci had collected material, essayed critiques and reflected on 'classic' themes of Marxist philosophy (most notably, materialism and idealism), particularly in relation to Croce's and Bukharin's perspectives. Now, however, while these moments of 'negative critique' continue, Gramsci also begins to outline his own positive, programmatic alternative.

This project is encapsulated in the idea of an 'introduction to philosophy'—not merely an introduction to Marxist philosophy, but an introduction to philosophy *tout court*. The reasons, both philosophical *and* political, for the more general rubric will be explored later.⁷⁶ For now, it is sufficient to note that Gramsci has added a new element to his project, one which organically emerges from his prior critiques and which decisively transforms the theoretical problematic in which they are inscribed. When Gramsci continues his critiques of Croce and Bukharin in Notebooks Ten and Eleven, it will be not merely on the basis of their weaknesses and internal contradictions, as had been the case in the earlier notebooks. Henceforth, they will also be assessed according to an additional criterion, one whose necessity had been revealed by a more exact understanding of the reasons for the *aporiai* of their respective systems. This is to say that Gramsci has moved from a limited moment of immanent critique, to a more aggressive *prise de position* on the *Kampfplatz* of contemporary philosophy, confronting the two revisionists no longer merely as a dissenter, but as a rival.

'An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy' is divided into seven brief points:⁷⁷

the first appearance of the famous proposition that 'all men are philosophers' (1);

the question of the connection between the three intellectual orders of religion, *sensu comune*, philosophy (2);

'science and religion—*sensu comune*' (3);

⁷⁶ Cf. Section 8.6.6.

⁷⁷ Q 8, §204.

the diversity of ‘philosophies’, rather than a unitary ‘philosophy’, in each historical period (4);

‘the systemisation of one’s own conception of the world and life’ (5);

and the question of the relation between philosophy, politics and ideology (7).

‘Transcendence, immanence, absolute historicism. Meaning and significance of the history of philosophy’ is the penultimate—and also one of the briefest—of the entries in this series (6). The Crocean heritage of the concept is not explicitly noted, as Gramsci presumably felt mere mention of this distinctively Crocean concept was self-explanatory, particularly in notes written for his own personal use. However, neither is the phrase signalled for special attention with the use of citation marks, as Gramsci often does on the first occasion of appropriating a concept from another thinker. This, and the fact that it is inscribed in a progression of terms (‘Transcendence, immanence, absolute historicism’) whose Crocean reference is self-evident, supports the thesis that Gramsci’s use of absolute historicism here does not yet function as a ‘sublation of a previously existing mode of thought’.⁷⁸ That is, Gramsci has not yet appropriated the concept as a description, or attribute, of his own philosophy of praxis. Rather, we are here dealing with a simple schematic note indicating the need for future research into the implications of the Crocean concept, particularly in relation to Croce’s claims to have rejected transcendence and elaborated a new (non-metaphysical) concept of immanence.

Nevertheless, at the risk of writing history in the future anterior, we can see the rudiments of Gramsci’s later transformation and integration of this concept into the philosophy of praxis in the inclusion of this concept in a list of ‘preliminary elements’ necessary to consider ‘for the compilation of an introduction or initiation into the study of philosophy’. We are dealing with what could be called a ‘partial appropriation’, or a ‘practical’ concept.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Q 8, §220.

⁷⁹ ‘This is a characteristic phenomenon of the *transitions-breaks* that constitute the advent of a new problematic. At certain moments in the history of ideas we see these *practical concepts* emerge, and typically they are *internally unbalanced* concepts. In one aspect they belong to the old ideological universe which serves as their “theoretical” reference [...]; but in the other they concern a new domain, pointing out the *displacement* to be put into effect to get to it. In the first aspect they retain a “theoretical” meaning

It is used to indicate the necessary direction for future research that aims at appropriating it fully: from transcendence to immanence, finally arriving at 'absolute historicism' as the formal consummation of this sequence (formal, because it is the concept's status as the end point of an 'immanentism' purged of all residual 'transcendence', rather than its substantive content in Croce's thought, that motivates Gramsci's ascription of importance to it). Supporting evidence for this thesis is provided by an alternative line of affiliation sketched out in the same period, which similarly becomes central for Gramsci's later research. In the fifth note entitled 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy',⁸⁰ Gramsci proposes the following research programme.

Beyond the series 'transcendence, theology, speculation—speculative philosophy', the other series 'transcendence, immanence, speculative historicism—philosophy of praxis'. All historicist theories of a speculative character are to be controlled and criticised. From this point of view, it would be necessary to write a new *Anti-Dühring*, which could be an *Anti-Croce*, because in this one could not only summarise the polemic against speculative philosophy, but also, implicitly, the polemic against positivism and mechanistic theories, deterioration of the philosophy of praxis.⁸¹

7.2.8. Speculation

The argument that the chief weakness of Croce's historicism was its speculative character had already been announced, as we have seen, in Q 8, §224 and in a series of notes from the same period (from April 1932 onwards).⁸² Why did Gramsci begin to emphasise the particular theme of philosophical speculation (rather than, for instance, that of idealism), as the most disabling and revealing element of Croce's thought? He seems to have been spurred into attack as

[...]; in the second their only meaning is as a *practical* signal, pointing out a direction and a destination' (Althusser 1969, p. 244).

⁸⁰ The preceding notes entitled 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy' had dealt with other themes outlined in Q 8, §204: problem of the 'semplici', philosophy and religion, philosophy and *senso comune* or *buon senso* (Q 8, §213); *senso comune* (Q 8, §220); and structure and superstructure (Q 8, §231) (significantly, not present in the initial list of themes to be pursued under the rubric of an introduction to the study of philosophy).

⁸¹ Q 8, §235; written in April 1932.

⁸² The series includes at least the following notes: Q 8 §235 (April 1932), §238; Q 10I, §7, §8; Q 10II, §6, §9, §10 (all from May 1932), §31 (June–August 1932), reaching its consummation in Q 10II, §61 and Q 11, §53 in late 1932 or early 1933.

the result of defensive manoeuvres on two related but distinct fronts. On the one hand, he defended the historicist dimensions of Hegel's thought against its 'logical' purification by neo-idealism. Relatively early in his research, in November 1930, Gramsci had asked

is the reform of Hegelianism undertaken by Croce-Gentile 'completely' exact? Haven't they rendered Hegel more 'abstract'? Haven't they cut away the most realistic part of it, the most historicist? And isn't it precisely this part [instead] from which Marxism is essentially born? That is, isn't the sublation of Hegelianism undertaken by Marx the most fertile historical development of this philosophy, while the reform of Croce-Gentile is precisely only a 'reform' and not a sublation?⁸³

Gramsci here, and in general when discussing this element of Hegel's thought, demonstrates himself to be well in advance (or felicitously behind) the interpretations current in his day (and still sometimes in our own). Against a recurrent caricature, he emphasises, following the young Marx and the mature Engels, that Hegel's great achievement lay in making history thinkable, and not in its conversion into thought.⁸⁴

On the other hand, and more significantly, Gramsci was seeking to rebuff Croce's charge that Marx's thought was founded upon metaphysical presuppositions that his own system had overcome. For the mature Croce, Marxism and its pseudo-concepts represented nothing more than a variation on traditional dual-world explanations of the metaphysical tradition. Croce asserted that the economic structure, argued by the late Engels to be determining of other social practices 'in the last instance', was a modern variation of the

⁸³ Q 4, §56; cf. Q 10II, §41X; *FSPN*, pp. 399–401. The end of note Q 4, §56, entitled 'Machiavelli and the "Autonomy" of the Political Fact' witnesses the first deployment of the term 'speculation' in the *Prison Notebooks*. In relation to Vico and Hegel, Gramsci draws attention to the difference 'between pure abstract speculation and the "philosophy of history" that should lead to the identification of philosophy and history, of doing and thinking, of the "German proletariat as the only inheritor of classical German philosophy"' (Q 4, §56).

⁸⁴ The young Croce also seems to have been drawn to this element of Hegel's thought, read through a Marxian lens, before going the way of those interpreters against whom he had initially rebelled. He fondly recalled in 1917 that 'by means of that system [historical materialism], I felt the allure of the great historical philosophy of the Romantic period, and discovered an Hegelianism much more concrete and alive than that which one usually encountered in scholars and expositors who reduced Hegel to a sort of theologian or Platonising metaphysics' (Croce 1968, p. xiii).

Platonic *eidos*, or a post-Hegelian return to the Kantian noumenon. Full reality was accorded only to the structure, and the superstructure was then grasped as mere appearance, mimetic failure or phenomenon; Marxism remained indifferent to real history, because it had already declared it to be essentially unreal. Gramsci returned the charge with interest: if Croce could see in the founding propositions of the materialist conception of history only a speculative metaphysics, then this was because his own thought was essentially speculative, trapped in an 'idea' of history that was unable to comprehend its own historicity.

If the notion of structure is conceived 'speculatively', it assuredly does become a 'hidden god' but, for that very reason, it must be conceived not 'speculatively' but historically, as the ensemble of social relations in which real people move and act, as an ensemble of objective conditions which can and must be studied with the methods of 'philology' and not of 'speculation'.⁸⁵

For Gramsci, on the other hand, a 'philological' investigation of the superstructures demonstrated precisely the reality of their historical constitution and mutability, as the index of their *Wirklichkeit* and not their speculative reflection.

The terms 'apparent' and 'appearance' [...] are the assertion of the perishable nature of every ideological system, side by side with the assertion that all systems have an historical validity, and are necessary ('Man acquires consciousness of social relations in the ideological terrain': is not this an affirmation of the necessity and the validity of 'appearances'?).⁸⁶

7.2.9. Speculative philosophy as a moment of hegemony

From this point on, the critique of speculation, and its opposition to 'historical' or 'realistic' interpretations,⁸⁷ becomes a touchstone of Gramsci's philosophical reflection, the lens through which he examines the historicity of any philosophical proposition. It will become a determinant perspective, allowing Gramsci to insist that it is not philosophy as such, but the particular historical form of

⁸⁵ Q 101, §8; *FSPN*, p. 347.

⁸⁶ Q 8, §60.

⁸⁷ Q 8, §217; written in March 1932.

speculative philosophy, that must be rejected by the workers' movement. In its turn, this will open the way to the elaboration of a 'philosophy of a completely different type' in the philosophy of praxis. As Haug notes,

it is not the critique of philosophy as a thought form that is therefore on the agenda for Gramsci, but rather, the critique of speculation as its theoretical 'mode of production'.⁸⁸

Significantly, no sooner has he posited it as a criterion of philosophical judgement than Gramsci immediately considers its political import in a seminal passage that links the question of speculation to the historicity and function of hegemony, producing his own version of Hegel's 'Owl of Minerva':

Introduction to the Study of Philosophy. Speculative Philosophy. One can reflect on this point: whether the element 'speculation' is innate to every philosophy or whether it is a phase of a philosophical thought in development according to the general process of a determinate historical period. One could then say that every culture has its speculative or religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group which it expresses, and maybe coincides precisely with the moment in which the real hegemony disaggregates but the system of thought is perfected and refined as happens in epochs of decline. Critique resolves speculation into its real terms of ideology, but critique itself will have its speculative phase, which will mark its apogee. The question is this: if this apogee will not be the beginning of an historical phase in which there will be, as necessity-freedom will be organically interpenetrated in the social fabric, another dialectic than the ideal one.⁸⁹

The organising status of the critique of speculation, discovered towards the end of Notebook Eight, is given pride of place at the beginning of Notebook Ten. Gramsci repeats the conjugation of 'transcendence-theology-speculation' with an important addition: the opposition between 'speculative historicism and realistic historicism'.⁹⁰ In this notebook (which constitutes, in part, the previously advertised *Anti-Croce*), Gramsci intensifies his critique of the theoret-

⁸⁸ Haug 1999, p. 1206.

⁸⁹ Q 8, §238; cf. Q 11, §53; SPN, p. 370.

⁹⁰ Q 10I, 8°; FSPN, p. 330; cf. Q 10I, §11; FSPN, pp. 354–6; Q 10II, §6; SPN, pp. 366–7; FSPN, p. 306, pp. 402–3.

ical presuppositions of Croce's self-declared 'absolute historicism'. Croce had indeed argued that philosophy progresses by solving problems presented to it by historical development, and not in terms of a closed sphere of thought: Croce 'seeks the systematic nature not in an external architectonic structure but in the intimate coherence and fertile comprehensiveness of each particular solution',⁹¹ Gramsci notes. Croce had argued that the absolute historicism of his thought consisted in its establishment of the unity of philosophy and history. However, as we have seen, the central propositions of his philosophical system contradicted this claim, insofar as they relied upon a tacit and irreducible abyss between such historical events and facts and the categories used to comprehend them. As Roth notes, Croce's absolute historicism only went 'half-way', because he 'takes the categories of Spirit out of this historicity'.⁹² Consequently, Croce attempted to maintain that there was a qualitative distinction between philosophy—understood as a disinterested search for truth, participating in the 'eternity' of the ahistorical categories of thought—and ideologies, which he reduced to mere instruments of political action, subject to the ebb and flood of the conjuncture.⁹³

In short, thought sullied by its involvement in practical affairs, according to Croce, is not 'thought' at all. It is a practical rather than theoretical instance of a self-present Spirit. Unlike the closing line of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* or the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Gramsci argues, Croce's attempt to think the identity of history and philosophy was incoherent and contradictory, because 'he doesn't attain to the identity of history and politics [...] and thus he also doesn't attain to the identity of politics and philosophy'.⁹⁴ In effect, Croce's historicism is accused of being an 'incomplete' historicism that acknowledges the historicity of previous philosophies, but cannot comprehend its own historicity and the extent to which it is defined by its presence in a constellation of contemporary positions—that is, the status of this form of historicism itself as an 'ideology', an instrument of political action.

There is thus, despite their superficial opposition, a secret and more profound alliance between Croce's idealism and Bukharin's materialism. Both

⁹¹ Q 10I, §4; *FSPN*, p. 338.

⁹² Roth 1972, p. 68.

⁹³ Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, pp. 382–3.

⁹⁴ Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, p. 382.

positions assert their status as knowledge to be 'above the fray' of immediate interests, possessors of a 'Truth' denied to other, merely ideological positions. Both therefore implicitly presuppose a metaphysical model of thought, qualitatively—and not merely relatively—autonomous from non-thought. Both attempt to articulate thought with social practice (Croce, by means of his omnipresent Spirit, immanent in its transcendence; Bukharin, through a theory of the correspondence of the objective interests of the proletariat and Marxist theory). However, both remain unable to demonstrate an integral relationship between the two, let alone to think thought itself as a determinate social practice ranged alongside other determinate social practices.

7.3. Ideology *sive* philosophy

Gramsci, on the other hand, in one of the richest passages of the *Prison Notebooks*,⁹⁵ describes the distinction between philosophy and ideology as a quantitative one, related to the level of social, political and historical coherence (in the specific sense this word has for Gramsci) of conceptions of the world.⁹⁶ The immediate context is a critique of Croce's history of the nineteenth century, as an attempt to write an 'ethical-political history',⁹⁷ or an Hegelian 'history of freedom'.⁹⁸ It is framed by Gramsci's ongoing 'destruction of the destruction', that is, his critique of Croce's critique of Marxism.⁹⁹ Gramsci begins the note by analysing Hegel's expansive proposition—dear to Croce—that history is the 'history of freedom'.¹⁰⁰ Gramsci wryly notes that if this is indeed the case for *all* history, history *as such* (and not merely select moments of it), 'freedom' could then only be a euphemism for 'development'. The nineteenth century in Europe was characterised not simply by being a 'history of freedom' (the presupposition of Croce's influential historiography), but by being a 'history of freedom conscious of being such',¹⁰¹ embodied in the emergence of 'liberalism',

⁹⁵ Q 10I, § 10; *FSPN*, pp. 351–4; written in May 1932.

⁹⁶ On the specificity of the term 'coherence' in Gramsci's vocabulary, cf. Haug 2006, pp. 21–3, p. 61. Cf. Section 8.6.

⁹⁷ Q 10I, § 9; *FSPN*, p. 348.

⁹⁸ Q 10I, § 10; *FSPN*, p. 351.

⁹⁹ Q 10I, § 8; *FSPN*, pp. 346–8; Q 10I, § 11; *FSPN*, pp. 354–6.

¹⁰⁰ Q 10I, § 10; *FSPN*, p. 351.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

in the broadest sense. Not simply in generic terms: at a decisive moment

there was constituted a current and a party that specifically called itself liberal, which made an immediate political ideology out of the speculative and contemplative position of Hegelian philosophy, a practical instrument of domination and social hegemony.¹⁰²

Such was the ambivalence of the term 'freedom', however, in its original Hegelian formulation just as much as in its positioning on the *Kampfplatz* of changing political alliances and manoeuvres, that it became merely a 'conceptual enwrapping [*involucro*]' whose 'real core' was 'filled' by different social groups at different times and in different forms: for the dominant social group, 'freedom' functioned as a 'religion' (in the sense defined by Croce, a *Weltauffassung* that issued in a morality); for the subaltern classes, as mere 'superstition' (aligned to the ruling bloc under the aegis of freedom, they were 'free' to remain in a subaltern condition strongly marked by the practices of the Catholic Church).

Here, Gramsci notes a profound performative contradiction in Croce's historiographical and philosophical thought.

It seems to me that Croce doesn't succeed, not even from his point of view, in maintaining the distinction between 'philosophy' and 'ideology', between 'religion' and 'superstition' which is essential for his way of thinking and for his polemic with the philosophy of praxis.¹⁰³

'Freedom' in fact functioned as a non-vanishing mediator that united the incompatible poles of the Crocean paradigm, demonstrating the real contradictions (of class interests and projects) that underwrote Croce's 'distinctions'. This had determinate effects upon the historiographical terrain, which Gramsci unveiled in a classic instance of ideology-critique.

He believes he writes a history in which the element of class is exorcised and instead he describes with great accuracy and merit the political masterpiece by means of which a determinate class manages to present and to have accepted the conditions of its existence and its class development as a

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Q 101, § 10; *FSPN*, pp. 352–3.

universal principle, as a conception of the world, as a religion, that is, he describes in reality the development of a practical means of government and domination.¹⁰⁴

On the strictly ‘philosophical’ terrain (a term which is immanently redefined in the course of this critique at any rate), this performative contradiction had even more profound effects, because

after having distinguished philosophy from ideology, [Croce] finishes by confusing a political ideology with a conception of the world, practically demonstrating that the distinction is impossible, that it isn’t a case of two categories, but of the same historical category and that the distinction is only one of gradation.¹⁰⁵

The gradation, as Gramsci immediately specifies, is to be conceived in political and historical terms:

philosophy is the conception of the world that represents the intellectual and moral life (catharsis of a determinate practical life) of an entire social group conceived in movement and thus seen not only in its current and immediate interests, but also in its future and mediated interests; ideology is any particular conception of groups inside the class that propose to help in the resolution of immediate and circumscribed problems.¹⁰⁶

Philosophy, in the positive sense in which Gramsci uses it in this passage, is a conception of the world which tends to raise the level of awareness of historical determination and to increase the capacity to act of an entire social class; ideology, on the other hand, is conceived as corresponding to the perceived interests of a class fraction, directed to the resolution of immediate problems.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Q 10I, § 10; *FSPN*, p. 353.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*; cf. Q 10II, § 31i; *FSPN*, pp. 383–9. Gramsci may have been stimulated to reformulate philosophy in these terms by his judgement of the distinctive political practice of the Jacobins. In the extensive note early in his project that announces so many of Gramsci’s fundamental themes, he argued that ‘the Jacobins therefore represent the only party of the revolution, in as much as they not only see the immediate interests of the actual physical people who constitute the French bourgeoisie, but they also see the interests of tomorrow and not only of those determinate physical people, but of other social strata of the Third Estate who will become bourgeois tomorrow, because they are persuaded by *égalité* and *fraternité*’ (Q 1, § 44).

¹⁰⁷ In the words of Althusser: ‘an essential aspect of all *ideology* [is that it] takes its

The significance of these definitions, won by means of an immanent critique of Croce that goes beyond his thought from within, is such that they merit an extended consideration.

Before doing so, we should recall that this definition does not represent the only definition of the distinction between philosophy and ideology in the *Prison Notebooks*. At different times, Gramsci proposes different definitions of these terms and of the relations between them. In particular, the concept of ideology is subject to a greater variation of definition in Gramsci's thought than it is even in the writings of Marx and Engels themselves, famously multivalent on this issue.¹⁰⁸ In Gramsci's most significant formulation of this concept and his related redefinition of the superstructures, as we have seen, ideology is conceived in a neutral sense, as the form in which humans know a world wracked by the 'real' contradictions of class struggle. It would therefore be incorrect to attempt to generalise the distinction presented in this passage (particularly when it is read out of context) as 'Gramsci's notion of ideology', or to present it as an essential or definitive formulation that supersedes preceding or subsequent usages.

Nevertheless, this particular definition of the relation between ideology and philosophy as a continuum rather than a *coupure* is highly significant for understanding the political determinations that Gramsci introduces at the heart of these categories. The political efficacy of ideology is a well-known

meaning from the *current* interests in whose service it is subjected' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 141); ideology is 'content to *reflect* the historical changes which it is its mission to assimilate and master by some imperceptible modification of its peculiar internal relations' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 142); 'Ideology changes therefore, but imperceptibly, conserving its ideological form; it moves, but with an immobile motion which maintains it *where it is*, in its place and its ideological role. It is the immobile motion which, as Hegel said of philosophy itself, reflects and expresses what happens in history without ever running ahead of its own time, since it is merely that time *caught* in the trap of a mirror reflection, precisely so that men will be *caught* in it too' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 142). 'For if philosophy is in the last instance class struggle at the level of theory, the politics which constitute philosophy (like the philosophy which supports the thought of political thinkers) cannot be identified with such-and-such an episode of the political struggle, nor even with the political inclinations of the authors. The politics which constitute philosophy bear on and turn around a quite different question: *that of the ideological hegemony of the ruling class*, whether it is a question of organizing it, strengthening it, defending it or fighting against it' (Althusser 1976, p. 167).

¹⁰⁸ For an account of Gramsci's different uses of the concept of ideology and a comparison to other formulations in the Marxist tradition, cf. Rehmann 2004 and 2008, particularly pp. 82–101.

theme; the political constitution of philosophy—not merely particular philosophies, but philosophy as such—is a thesis more difficult to grasp, even for some within the Marxist tradition. The radical challenge it represents to the traditional conception of philosophy has undoubtedly played a role in the still lingering accusation of Gramsci's putative 'idealism' (ironically, often in the name of the defence of the de-politicising, 'inverted' idealism promoted under the name of 'Diamat'). Nonetheless, it becomes the heart and soul of all of Gramsci's philosophical researches, embodied in the famous equation 'history = philosophy = politics', and articulated around a redefined notion of praxis. It permits Gramsci to think both the historicity of the present, the extent to which the present is not identical with itself but is fractured by residual formations from past and emergent formations orientated to new social practices, and the means by which a philosophy of praxis's consciousness of its political and historical determination increases, rather than decreases, its capacity to contribute to social transformation. My thesis here is that this passage becomes the guiding thread for the rest of Gramsci's explorations of the concept of the philosophy of praxis as an absolute historicism in the *Prison Notebooks*. It presents, in a brief and succinct formulation, four of the fundamental presuppositions of Gramsci's project:

1. The non-contemporaneity of the present
2. The impossibility of an 'essential section'
3. Philosophy *sive* history *sive* politics
4. The philosophy of praxis as the 'catharsis' of a determinate practical life.

Taken in their totality, these positions definitively refute the presuppositions of Althusser's critique.

7.3.1. The non-contemporaneity of the present

First, in this passage, we see one of the fundamental themes of the *Prison Notebooks*: the non-contemporaneity of the present, or the present's non-identity with itself.¹⁰⁹ Althusser argued that Gramsci's notion of Marxism as an absolute historicism entailed a relapse into a Hegelian conception of the present, as

¹⁰⁹ On this theme, in a historiographical register, cf. Burgio 2002, p. 64 et sqq.

an essentially unified and coherent 'presence' of *Geist*, 'the ideological present in which temporal presence coincides with the presence of the essence with its phenomena'.¹¹⁰ He argued that

if Marxism is an absolute historicism, it is because it historicizes even what was peculiarly the theoretical and practical negation of history for Hegelian historicism: the end of history, the unsurpassable present of Absolute Knowledge. [...] There is no longer any privileged present in which the totality becomes visible and legible in an 'essential section', in which consciousness and science coincide. The fact that there is no Absolute Knowledge—which is what makes the historicism *absolute*—means that Absolute Knowledge itself is historicized. If there is no longer any privileged present, all presents are privileged to the same degree. It follows that historical time possesses in each of its presents a structure which allows each present the 'essential section' of contemporaneity. [...] Hence the project of thinking Marxism as an (absolute) historicism automatically unleashes a logically necessary chain reaction which tends to reduce and flatten out the Marxist totality into a variation of the Hegelian totality.¹¹¹

Clearly, Althusser's argument depends upon a sophistical conflation and argument by analogy: Hegel had qualified the apex of knowledge in his system as 'absolute'; Gramsci had deployed the same adjective to specify Marxism's form of historicism; *ergo*, 'absolute knowledge' and 'absolute historicism' possessed the same structure, properties and conceptual consequences.¹¹² Yet, as we have seen, nothing could be further from the native temper of Gramsci's thought than the notion of a homogeneous present. The *Prison Notebooks* are replete with concrete historical studies and theoretical reflections demonstrating and taking theoretical cognisance of the temporal and spatial 'dislocations' that characterise the distinctive nature of modern historical experience. For Gramsci, the present is necessarily non-identical with itself, composed of numerous 'times' that do not coincide but encounter each other with mutual incomprehension. The 'non-presence of the present' was a visceral theme for

¹¹⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 99.

¹¹¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 132.

¹¹² Astoundingly, this argument has won wide and continuing assent. It is doubtful that the equation of two other subjects with the same predicate ('both the cat and the cow are black; therefore, the cow and the cat are the same') could have enjoyed the same illustrious career. Or perhaps this is the night in which all cows are indeed truly black?

the imprisoned and increasingly isolated Gramsci, prompting him to reflect intensely on the tragedy of Cavalcanti.¹¹³ Rather than being expressive of an essence equally present in all practices, the present for Gramsci is precisely an ensemble of those practices in their different temporalities, struggling to assert their primacy and thus to articulate the present as an *achieved* rather than *originary* unity.

One of the forms in which this dislocation is played out occurs at the level of the constitution of the 'person [*la persona*]'—the Gramscian alternative to a theory of the subject, grasped in classical theatrical sense as a role or mask adopted in exterior relations to other roles—trapped in a condition of subalternity.¹¹⁴ Such a bizarrely composed personality

contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.¹¹⁵

Compiling an inventory of the 'infinity of traces' of the 'historical process' that constitutes such an incoherent present is the starting point for elaborating a critical consciousness aimed at overcoming it.¹¹⁶

Language itself, for Gramsci, gives ample evidence of the fractured nature of historical time, insofar as its constitutively metaphorical nature reveals layers or sediments of different historical experiences sitting together in an uncomfortable *modus vivendi*.

¹¹³ Cf. Section 7.3.4.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Sections 8.6.5. and 9.1.5.

¹¹⁵ *Q* 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 324.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* Gramsci's own personal experience surely contributed strongly to this perspective, though traces of such elements are noticeable in their absence in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci in fact expressed scepticism regarding the autobiographical genre, suggesting that instead 'memories' of 'civil and moral "experiences"' could provide a more satisfying form. In the same note, he provides the following touching 'phenomenological portrait' of 'the continuous attempt to overcome a retarded way of life and of thinking, like that which was the way of a Sard at the beginning of the century, in order to appropriate a way of life and of thinking no longer regional and of the "village", but national, and even more national (rather, national precisely for that reason) insofar as he sought to insert himself in European ways of life and of thinking. [...] If it is true that one of the greatest necessities of Italian culture was that of deprovincialising itself, even in the most advanced and modern urban centres, the process should appear even more evident insofar as it was experienced by a "threefold or fourfold provincial", as that young Sard certainly was at the beginning of the century' (*Q* 15, § 19). On Gramsci's Sardinian background, cf. Davidson 1977 and Fiori 1973.

Current language is metaphorical with respect to the meanings and the ideological content that words have had in preceding periods of civilisation. [...] Language is transformed with the transformation of the whole of civilisation, through the acquisition of culture by new classes and through the hegemony exercised by one national language over others, etc., and what it does is precisely to absorb in metaphorical form the words of previous civilisations and cultures.¹¹⁷

Similarly, dialects and national languages confront each other not in hierarchical relations of degeneration or purity but as performative indices of different tempos of historical development, ultimately linked to the conditions of political subalternity or hegemonic direction that shape the communities of their practitioners.

The present of individual nation-states is similarly fractured, in the relations between urban centres and rural peripheries (one role of which is to provide the metropolitan present with an image of its past, giving rise to and being played out in the temporal dislocations of 'national presents' of internal immigration). On an international level, the hegemonic relationships between different nations consign some social formations to the past 'times' of others. Gramsci's most famous example in this regard of the underdeveloped East in comparison with the advanced West has sometimes, as we have seen, been read as presupposing a normative and progressivist notion of capitalist development, or even an 'ideal type' of the modern state absent in an 'exceptional' Orient. In reality, however, the distinction between East and West merely reflects the fact that the tempo and efficacy of imperialist expansion itself progressively imposes an 'essential' unity on the disparity of different national historical experiences.

Above all, the non-contemporaneity of the present in Gramsci is a function and symptomatic index of the struggle between classes. The present, as the time of class struggle, is necessarily and essentially 'out of joint', fractured by the differential times of different class projects. In this conception, difference rather than unity is primary. Far from presupposing it, Gramsci demonstrates that the notion of a unified present is not objectively given in its sheer immediacy, but, rather, is a function of the social and political hegemony of one social

¹¹⁷ Q 11, §24; *SPN*, p. 450–2.

group seeking to impose its own 'present' as an unsurpassable horizon for all other social groups, an 'absolute horizon' not simply of knowing but also of praxis. Insofar as we can talk of a unified present or contemporaneity in Gramsci, it only emerges as the function of a class's hegemonic project that has progressed to the foundation of a state, or the constitution of its own form of political society, which then subjugates the various presents of its class antagonists. There is thus an ongoing struggle to unify any present, to produce a contemporaneity or coincidence of times that its actuality as a *Kampfplatz* of contradictions denies. A unified present is sheer false appearance, the image the ruling class crafts of its own project embodied in statal institutions, viewed from the perspective of the eternity it claims to embody.

More precisely, it is the image given to this project of the state by the ruling class's representatives or allies on the terrain of civil society, particularly those 'traditional intellectuals' who experience 'with "*esprit de corps*" the continuity of their intellectual qualification'¹¹⁸ and feel themselves to be 'strongly linked to Aristotle and Plato', but at the same time do not hide the fact that they are also linked 'to senators Agnelli and Benni'.¹¹⁹ It was precisely this role that Croce's philosophy fulfilled for the Italian ruling class, and for this reason that Gramsci stressed that Croce was in fact more 'hegemonic' than Gentile, the latter's closer connection to the Fascist state apparatus notwithstanding.¹²⁰ One of the roles of speculative philosophy for Gramsci, as we have seen, is to fix an 'eternal' image of the current hegemony of a social group, often at the very moment that it is disintegrating. In this perspective, speculative philosophy provides an unmoving reflection of the 'empty time' of the *durata*, attempting to 'catch' the present 'in the trap of a mirror reflection, precisely so that men will be *caught* in it too'.¹²¹ It is precisely the need for such a speculative unification of the present, however, that most clearly demonstrates the real contradictions that divide it.

¹¹⁸ Q 4, §49.

¹¹⁹ Q 12, §1.

¹²⁰ Gramsci nevertheless insisted on the need to consider the two philosophers together, for political as well as theoretical reasons: 'Croce's philosophy cannot, however, be examined independently of Gentile's. An *Anti-Croce* must also be an *Anti-Gentile*. Gentilian actualism will add the chiaroscuro effects necessary to throw the features of the picture into greater relief' (Q 101, §11; *FSPN*, p. 356).

¹²¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 142.

7.3.2. The impossibility of an 'essential section'

Second, philosophy is clearly not conceived here as an essential section of an essence, or as organically emerging from its time. It was this conception, Althusser claimed, that underlay Gramsci's notion of Marxist philosophy: it was understood to be a 'direct expression' of such a unified present,¹²² its most coherent emanation, implicitly reducing Marxist philosophy to the status of an 'organic ideology'.¹²³

It is not completely accidental that Gramsci is constantly haunted by Croce's theory of religion; that he accepts its terms, and extends it from actual religions to the new 'conception of the world', Marxism; that he ranges these religions and Marxism under the same concept as 'conceptions of the world' and 'ideologies'; that he so easily identifies religion, ideology, philosophy and Marxist theory.¹²⁴

Philosophy also, and Marxist philosophy in particular, was thus ultimately contemporaneous with itself, because it was merely its time expressed in thought, according to the famous Hegelian formulation. This might 'give a fair account of the relationship between an organic ideology and its age',¹²⁵ but was unfit to capture the distinctive relationship to its time maintained by a philosophy such as Marxist philosophy that was scientific in nature.

Certainly, for Croce, as we have seen, the present is truly and necessarily identical with itself, contemporaneous in all the component parts of an omnipresent *Spirito* that contains (synchronic) 'distinctions' but not (diachronic) 'real differences'. Croce's 'history of freedom' was a 'history of the present', in both a weak and a strong sense: in a weak sense, since his purported histories of the nineteenth century were in fact written, as Gramsci demonstrated, from a particular viewpoint of the early twentieth century (thus this particular present redefined its past in its own image); in a strong sense, since history only becomes intelligible for Croce as a series of moments that are complete in themselves, arranged alongside one another (transition between them only secured by the mediation of a third term, the ever-present Spirit, which

¹²² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 132.

¹²³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

¹²⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, pp. 130–1.

¹²⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

confers upon each particular moment its self-contained unity as well as its relation to other articulations i.e. moments in an evolutionary perspective). Certainly, Croce's thought indeed presupposes (in a way that Hegel's thought does *not*) what Althusser's describes as

an 'essential section' (*coupe d'essence*), i.e., an intellectual operation in which a *vertical break* is made at any moment in historical time, a break in the present such that all the elements of the whole revealed by this section are in an immediate relationship with one another, a relationship that immediately expresses their internal essence.¹²⁶

Indeed, the Althusserian concept of an 'essential section' seems almost designed to capture the *difference* between Croce's 'non-metaphysical', 'immanentist' 'reform' of Hegelianism and the original version's more modest claims: Croce's *Spirito* can tolerate nothing exterior to itself, while Hegel's *Geist* depends upon precisely that which it is not.¹²⁷ Althusser's mistake was to have lazily assumed, perhaps prompted by hearsay regarding Gramsci's indebtedness to Croce and a caricatured image of Hegel, that Gramsci had uncritically taken over precisely this element of Croce's thought, which the *Prison Notebooks* are at such pains to refute.

Gramsci, however, as we have seen in the passage under discussion,¹²⁸ implicitly denies that either a philosophy or an ideology is 'organic' to its

¹²⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 94.

¹²⁷ Althusser was surely incorrect to suggest that Hegel's conception of the unity of any particular historical moment proceeded from an essential identity, as if a post-Enlightenment philosophy of Absolute Spirit were merely a latter day echo of neo-Platonism. Here he perhaps relied upon a received image of an 'Hegelianism' that ironically owes not a little to tendencies such as those represented by Croce. Rather, the fundamental theme of Hegel's thought is the unity in difference of the concept, less an emanating principle than the self-movement of itself, which requires temporal disjunctions as constitutive elements. The uneven and combined development of the concept is central to Hegel's insistence on the historicity of dialectical progression (rather than systematicity of a merely formal logical relation of given elements). In the last instance and not the first, i.e. in the moment of absolute knowledge, *Geist* comprehends the unity of the phenomenal forms through which it has progressed in order to become itself, *but also* the necessity of their *real* (i.e. substantial and not merely apparent) difference, precisely as the precondition of their unity. Rather than the realisation of an essence, the Hegelian 'present' is an ensemble of elements whose unity is constituted retrospectively; central even to the moment of absolute knowledge is an acknowledgement that it is an historically achieved state, rather than eternally pre-given.

¹²⁸ *Q* 101, § 10.

time, as if the age, like Eliot's Prufrock, had thrown its 'nerves in patterns on a screen'. He distinguishes between ideologies and philosophies not on the basis of their temporal authenticity or lack of it, but in terms of their function and the extensiveness of their temporal reference. 'Ideologies', in this conception, are limited to particular interests focused upon the resolution of immediate problems, while what are here characterised as 'philosophies' aim to grasp more general if not universal interests in their historical evolution, with a privileged reference to the future. 'Philosophy' here, in fact, in accordance with Gramsci's redefinition of the superstructures, is an 'ideology' that has moved beyond its sheer immediacy and increased its level of coherence.¹²⁹ According to this formulation, neither philosophy nor ideology are direct expressions of a unified, self-present essence, since both are mediated by the organisation of interests of classes and class fractions.

Crucially, philosophy is constituted from the standpoint of a particular class's ongoing rather than immediate interests, and not from that of the age as such: this consciously partial perspective signals a decisive difference from any Hegelian teleology, whether mystical or rational. It is important to stress the class-constitution and efficacy of philosophy for Gramsci, rather than seeing it in terms of society as a whole or of the 'spirit of the age'. Gramsci introduces this political mediation to the Hegelian formula by means of reflection on 'hegemony' as a 'metaphysical event', in a first moment,¹³⁰ and as a 'philosophical fact', in a second.¹³¹ As Haug argues,

hegemony can be understood as the precondition of actuality [*Wirklichkeitsbedingung*] of a philosophy; when it fulfils this precondition, it corresponds to Hegel's formulation that it is 'its time expressed in thought'.¹³²

This formulation clearly captures the non-teleological and non-essentialist dimensions of Gramsci's notion of an 'achievement' of philosophy, as long as we bear in mind that the 'time' in this sense, just as much as philosophy, only becomes unified as such under the aegis of a class's hegemonic project. It is therefore not at all a question of finally discovering the adequate expression of a previously misrecognised essence; rather, it is a question of the production

¹²⁹ Cf. Section 8.6.

¹³⁰ Q 7, § 35; *SPN*, p. 357.

¹³¹ Q 1011, § 12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6.

¹³² Haug 2006, p. 29.

of the present as a more-or-less coherent ensemble of social relations, which is comprehended in theoretical terms by the production of a philosophy or *Weltanschauung* as a more-or-less coherent ensemble of superstructures in a hegemonic apparatus. As Gramsci argues,

the philosophy of an epoch is not the philosophy of this or that philosopher, of this or that group of intellectuals, of this or that broad section of the popular masses. It is a process of combination of all these elements, which culminates in an overall trend in which the culmination becomes a norm of collective action and becomes concrete and complete (integral) 'history'. The philosophy of an historical epoch is, therefore, nothing other than the 'history' of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality. History and philosophy are in this sense indivisible. They form a 'bloc'.¹³³

Ideology, on the other hand, is in this note similarly conceived in political terms, and not as 'organic' to its age, as emerging from it in a direct and immediate fashion, as was the case in the early and, arguably, also later Althusser.¹³⁴ Rather, it represents a particular type of partiality, a 'bad' partiality; the 'instrumental' resolution of immediate problems of a class, as they are understood by a limited, leading strata of that class that remains fixated upon such partiality and has not progressed to a truly hegemonic conception of their class's project. In another register, Gramsci describes this as the economic-corporative phase of a social group's historical emergence, counterposed to its properly political phase. According to the terms of this passage, a component part of the transition from the economic-corporative to the hegemonic is a class's transition from 'ideology' to 'philosophy', which 'represents' this transition in theoretical terms.

¹³³ Q 10II, § 17; SPN, p. 345.

¹³⁴ 'So ideology is as such an organic part of every social totality. It is as if human societies could not survive without these *specific formations*, these systems of representations (at various levels), their ideologies. Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life' (Althusser 1969, p. 232). Althusser was thus led to argue that '*historical materialism cannot conceive that even a communist society could ever do without ideology*, be it ethics, art or "world outlook" (ibid.). Gramsci's analysis of the political constitution of ideologies, which are thus historically constituted in determinate relations of force within the state rather than 'supra-historical', is thereby annulled. On the 'organic' ideology of the late Althusser, cf. Section 9.1.1.

The notion that philosophy is an *historical, political* achievement of a class is even more valid in Gramsci's perspective for the specific philosophy of the working-class movement, or the philosophy of praxis. All philosophy hitherto, according to Gramsci, has been overdetermined by the imperative of 'governing others'. It has been an 'extended ideology'.

The history of philosophy as it is generally understood, that is as the history of the philosophies of the philosophers, is the history of attempts and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole.¹³⁵

Expressed in even clearer terms, they are 'non-organic' creations because they are contradictory, because they are directed towards conciliating 'opposing and contradictory interests'.¹³⁶ This type of philosophy has maintained the subaltern classes in their subaltern position, glossing over or obscuring the true, fractured nature of the present by speculatively sanctifying it as the only possible present and thus as 'eternity'. The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, in its capacity as a 'coherent ideology', plays a diametrically opposed role:

The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society but is rather the very theory of these contradictions. It is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths, even the unpleasant ones, and in avoiding the (impossible) deceptions of the upper class and—even more—their own.¹³⁷

It is, in fact, this, the historical novelty of the working class's potential political and simultaneously philosophical achievement, that distinguishes the philosophy of praxis from other 'conceptions of the world', rather than its anchoring in the strictly ahistorical realm of the 'scientific'.

¹³⁵ Q 10II, §17; *SPN*, p. 344.

¹³⁶ Q 10II, §41xii; *FSPN*, p. 395.

¹³⁷ Q 10II, §41xii; *FSPN*, pp. 395–6.

7.3.3. Philosophy *sive* history *sive* politics

Third, the introduction of the term ‘politics’ to the equation of ‘history = philosophy’ refutes any interpretation that attempts to derive Gramsci’s thought from the tenets of Italian neo-Hegelianism. Althusser argued that ‘the “philosophy of praxis” can, as a philosophy, only be the philosophy of the philosophy-history identity’.¹³⁸ It reduced Marxist philosophy ‘to a mere “historical methodology”, i.e., to the mere self-consciousness of the historicity of history, to a reflection on the presence of real history in all its manifestations’.¹³⁹ ‘We have returned to Hegelian historicism “radicalized” by Croce’,¹⁴⁰ Althusser asserted. He was indeed correct to note that Croce asserted an identity of history and philosophy, but incorrect to accept this at face value. As Gramsci’s critique demonstrates, Croce’s ‘absolute historicism’ in fact annuls history itself by turning it into a speculative moment of Spirit. For Gramsci, on the other hand, as Roth argues,

a unity of philosophy and history can only exist if this at the same time means a unity of *history* and *politics* and thus of *philosophy* and *politics*.¹⁴¹

Gramsci introduces this third term, as Althusser does not seem to have noticed, precisely while criticising the limitations, and internal contradictions, of Croce’s binary equation, immediately before repeating his claim that the distinction between ideology and philosophy can only be quantitative rather than qualitative. He argues that

this proposition of Croce of the identity of history and philosophy [...] is mutilated if it doesn’t also attain to the identity of history and politics [...] and therefore also to the identity of politics and philosophy.¹⁴²

As Gramsci recognised, the mere identification of history and philosophy was not enough to prevent the emergence of a pacific narrative, in which philosophy was dissolved into history as its merely organic expression, or

¹³⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 137.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Roth 1972, p. 74.

¹⁴² Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, p. 382.

history was subordinated to a philosophical narrative that reveals its truth. Only the addition of politics, as the mediating term between history and philosophy, prevents their mutual effacement, for politics is the moment of struggle over the possibility of history and philosophy. Defined in this sense, 'philosophy' is identified with 'ideology', as we have seen, in the sense of a gradation. Furthermore, in this positive sense of philosophy/ideology (that is, as 'coherent ideology', or an ideology that seeks to build the coherence of social groups), ideology does not negate philosophy, but, rather, defines its practical and therefore non-speculative dimension.

Ideologies, rather, will be the 'true' philosophy since they will turn out to be those philosophical 'popularisations' that lead the masses to concrete action, to the transformation of reality. In other words, they are the mass aspect of every philosophical conception, which in the 'philosopher' assumes the characteristics of an abstract universality, divorced from time and space, the characteristics peculiar to a literary and anti-historical origin.¹⁴³

Furthermore, unlike Croce, Gramsci does not merely propose the *equation* of his key terms, but their *unity in distinction* or, as he formulates the problem at a later phase of his research, their relations of translatability.¹⁴⁴ Politics, philosophy/ideology and history constitute three attributes by means of which the substance of a contradictory and non-contemporaneous present can be variously comprehended; but politics is assigned the role of first among equals, as the transformative moment immanent to the others. The significance of this addition is such that it makes all attempts to reduce Gramsci's tripartite division to Croce's binary formula untenable. Once again, Althusser's critique is more properly directed at the positions of the latter rather than at those of the former, particularly since Gramsci already criticised Croce on precisely these points.¹⁴⁵ Insofar as the Crocean system was founded upon a fundamental

¹⁴³ Q 10II, §2; *FSPN*, p. 383.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Q 11, §46 et sqq.

¹⁴⁵ Althusser objected to the equation of history and philosophy because, in the case of Marxist philosophy, it disregarded the peculiar object that defined it: 'dialectical materialism disappears into historical materialism' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 137), theoretical reflections on the science of history were reduced to a 'methodological' moment within it. For the early Althusser, Marxist philosophy needed to remain 'a theoretically autonomous philosophy (autonomous in its object, theory and method)' (*ibid.*), which in practice meant that it could not but be an ahistorical metaphysics. It was not until the self-criticism of his early 'theoreticism' and a second definition of philosophy as 'in the

distinction of the ideological from the philosophical, and a subsequent elevation of philosophy alone as truly historical, Gramsci's innovation represents less a renovation of Italian neo-Hegelian idealism than its destruction. From the primacy of politics, not one single thesis proposed by either Croce or Gentile can be derived.¹⁴⁶

7.3.4. The philosophy of praxis as the 'catharsis' of a determinate practical life

Fourth, this passage clearly refutes the argument that the importance Gramsci assigns to 'philosophy' has a tendency to slip over into idealism, or the valorisation of thought over being. Already in 1959, Mario Tronti had suggested that the philosophy of praxis could be interpreted as a regression back towards the philosophical paradigm definitively surpassed by Marx's emphasis in *Capital* upon science.¹⁴⁷ In 1970, Christian Riechers argued that, in Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, 'Marxism becomes subjective idealism'.¹⁴⁸ Even today, lingering doubts about the fully 'materialist' nature of Gramsci's interpretation of Marxism remain. Althusser's insistence that Marxism was not an (absolute) historicism of philosophical pedigree is thus perhaps merely the best-known instance of a recurrent critique that has plagued the reception of Gramsci's thought.

Yet, in the formulation of Q 101, § 10, Gramsci explicitly assigns philosophy a more modest role, related to the catharsis of a 'determinate form of practical life'. Although it occurs only eight times in the *Prison Notebooks*, catharsis is one of the central terms of Gramsci's political theory. 'Translated' from his engagement with Croce's aesthetics and, in particular, the novel reading of the tenth Canto of Dante's *Inferno* developed in Notebook Four (§ 78–§ 87) in May 1930,¹⁴⁹ the term catharsis is used by Gramsci in order to signal the transition of an emergent social group from a subaltern economic-corporative phase to its self-constitution as a genuine class capable of exercising social and political hegemony. It is the moment of transition from the kingdom of necessity to an

last instance, class struggle in the field of theory' that he approached the political focus of Gramsci's position, without however explicitly repudiating his earlier dismissal.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Frosini 2003, p. 124.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Tronti 1959.

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Riechers 1970, p. 132.

¹⁴⁹ The two most extensive treatments of Gramsci's use of the term 'catharsis' in English are Buttigieg 1996 and Rosengarten 1986.

anticipation of the kingdom of freedom, from the 'objective' to the 'subjective', or a movement from subjection to the 'structure' to the elaboration of new, enabling 'superstructures'. In Q 10II, §6, he argues that

the term 'catharsis' can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that is the superior elaboration of the structure into the superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from 'objective to subjective' and from 'necessity to freedom'. Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to itself and makes him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the 'cathartic' moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting-point for all the philosophy of praxis.¹⁵⁰

At first sight, such an emphasis may appear to overvalue the usefulness for Marxism of a concept traditionally associated with a limited sub-discipline of aesthetics.¹⁵¹ Aristotle famously used it in order to describe one of the distinguishing characteristics of tragedy; His single, enigmatic sentence reads as follows: 'mímesis práxeos [...] dí'eléou kaì phóbou peráinousa tèn tôn toioúton pathemáton kátharsin'; approximately, 'mimesis of action arousing fear and pity, and thereby accomplishing the catharsis of such states'.¹⁵² The rediscovery of the text of the *Poetics* in the West after the fall of Byzantium, in the context of radically different literary-theatrical conventions and social relations, witnessed a complex and sometimes contradictory reception history, passing through phases of moral and emotional-passional interpretations, from Castelvetro and French neo-classicism to Nietzsche and Freud. The

¹⁵⁰ Q 10II, §6.

¹⁵¹ The editors of *Selections from the 'Prison Notebooks'* astoundingly argued that 'the highly original use here of the word "catharsis" to indicate (roughly speaking) the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness was perhaps suggested to Gramsci by his mental habit of selecting terminology unlikely to alert the suspicions of the censor' (SPN, p. 366). In truth, as both Buttigieg and Rosengarten demonstrate, Gramsci's use of the term catharsis involves a fundamental critique of Croce's aesthetics. Rossi and Vacca (2007) have provocatively argued that what was at stake in these researches politically was a not-so-coded communication with Togliatti regarding the direction of the Italian Communist Party.

¹⁵² Aristotle, 1449 b 28.

precise meaning of this formulation, in the context of Aristotle's philosophy and critique of Plato, remains disputed to this day.¹⁵³

The word 'catharsis', however, also had an important role in pre-Socratic medical discourses, where it was deployed in the sense of a purgation of discordant elements from the human body. Plato metaphorically adopted this conventional usage in order to describe the therapeutic role of philosophy, particularly regarding the relation of the soul to the body: in the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that it is the love of wisdom (philosophy) that effects the cathartic moment that liberates the soul from the body.¹⁵⁴ The philosopher is the privileged agent and location of such (self)-liberation.¹⁵⁵

At least one (Platonising) tradition of interpretation of Aristotle's use of the concept in the *Poetics* (roughly speaking, the emotional-passional interpretation, descending to Freud and, more strongly, Lacan) continued this focus, by arguing that the cathartic event was located in the soul of the individual spectator capable of deriving intellectual pleasure from the contemplation of mimesis, the form of forms (the soul) contemplating another form purged of the inessential and thereby purging or purifying itself theoretically. Some of the most significant inheritors of this conception in modernity, as Gramsci wryly noted, were

the intellectuals, who conceive of themselves as the arbiters and mediators of real political struggles, as personifying the 'catharsis'—the passage from the economic aspect to the ethico-political one—i.e. the synthesis of the dialectical process itself, a synthesis that they 'manipulate' in a speculative fashion in their mind, measuring out the elements 'arbitrarily' (that is to say passionately). This position justifies their less than total 'engagement' in

¹⁵³ For an overview of some elements of the reception history, cf. Henn 1956. A more extensive account is Mittenzwei 2001.

¹⁵⁴ Plato, *Ph.* 69b.

¹⁵⁵ This is the main sense in which the term is still commonly used today, as a sort of homeopathy for the individual spectator (disturbance of the passions by the representation of, or through, fear and pity, in order to expel them). Aristotle, who had insisted that mimesis was not damaging to the soul but, in certain forms, educative, is thereby reduced to precisely the Platonic positions he was rejecting. The main modern opponent of this tendency was, of course, Brecht, whose anti-Aristotelian theatre arguably became increasingly Aristotelian (in the transition from the *Messingkauf Dialogues* to the *Short Organon*) precisely by rejecting a 'subjectivist' conception of catharsis and insisting that the intellectual pleasure of the theatre should find its end in the pleasure of critical social transformation.

the real historical process and is, without doubt, very convenient. It is the position that Erasmus took with respect to the Reformation.¹⁵⁶

Foremost among such figures, of course, was Benedetto Croce.

In Gramsci's formulation, however, it is not philosophy that effects the catharsis of a 'determinate form of practical life'. Rather, philosophy *re-presents* the catharsis of the intellectual and moral life of a whole social group:

philosophy is the conception of the world that *represents* the intellectual and moral life (catharsis of a determinate practical life) of an entire social group.¹⁵⁷

The formulation can be interpreted in two senses: according to the first, philosophy plays the role of a self-absenting subject, 're-presenting' such a cathartic moment, making present once again the prior achievements of a class's political practice in coherent conceptual terms; according to the second, in a predicative mode, philosophy 'stands in' for this advance made upon another terrain. In both cases, philosophy's role is not creative (in any sense of the 'pure act', *ex nihilo*), but comprehensive. Philosophy arrives *après coup* to survey the achievements of the day's battle, or it describes precisely such an achievement, which necessarily exceeds the description philosophy tries to offer of it. Philosophy's 'symptomatic' status, however, is also twofold: produced by the intellectual and moral life of a whole social group, it immediately reacts upon it insofar as it also is an integral element of that intellectual and moral life, transforming the conditions of its own constitution through the active redefinition of the social and political terrain it strives to comprehend. Once again, Althusser's objections fell short of their target. In a manner similar to Foucault's famous description of Hegel, Althusser's critique, taken seriously and pursued throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, ultimately finds its antagonist elsewhere, silently waiting.

7.4. Towards a philosophy of praxis

Gramsci continues his critique of the failings and contradictions of Croce's version of absolute historicism throughout Notebooks Eight and Ten (many notes of which, as we have seen, are written in the same period although in

¹⁵⁶ Q 101, §6; *FSPN*, p. 343.

¹⁵⁷ Q 101, §10; *FSPN*, p. 353; italics mine.

different notebooks). However, the most significant conceptual development of these months (from June 1932 onwards in particular) consists in Gramsci's synthesis of the terms of his critique of Croce with his renewed attempt in Section Two of Notebook Eleven to refute the tradition of metaphysical materialism within Marxism. In so doing, he proposes in increasingly more urgent terms the necessity of elaborating the materialist conception of history as a *philosophy of praxis*.

As previously noted, Notebook Eleven does not contain an independent 'Introduction to Marxist Philosophy or Marxism'. Rather, in its central sections, Gramsci undertakes a sustained critique of Bukharin's positions, on the basis of his own distinctive perspective, grouping together and refining notes he had already elaborated in earlier notebooks. As we will see in Chapter Eight, the decisive theoretical novelty of Notebook Eleven is the systematic deployment of the thesis of the integral relationship of *senso comune* and philosophy, both 'sedimented' in each other, in varying forms. This means that a philosophy of praxis cannot be presented as a definitive system. Rather, it can only emerge as an act of immanent critique, both of *senso comune* and of the 'philosophies of the philosophers'. The expression 'absolute historicism', one of the spoils of victory of Gramsci's clash with Croce, is reformed in this dialectical workshop into a genuinely new concept that both co-ordinates and summarises his campaign against Bukharin's 'inverted idealism'.¹⁵⁸ Few elements of Bukharin's thought are spared from attack. For our present purpose of elucidating the meaning and significance of the *Prison Notebooks's* 'absolute historicism', we can focus upon four of Gramsci's skirmishes with this emerging 'orthodoxy' that are particularly significant for the development of his historicist perspective.

- i. Although Bukharin's 'materialism' seems to be a perspective diametrically opposed to Croce's 'idealism', Gramsci discovers the same lack of a genuine critique of metaphysics and speculative philosophy at work in Bukharin's search for a first philosophy to underwrite an historical materialist sociology¹⁵⁹ as he did in Croce's 'history according to a plan':¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Q 11, § 14; SPN, p. 437.

¹⁵⁹ Q 11, § 14; SPN, pp. 436–7.

¹⁶⁰ Q 10II, § 41xvi; FSPN, p. 376.

'empirical concepts and classifications replace the speculative categories, just as abstract and anti-historical as these'.¹⁶¹

- ii. Bukharin dismisses past philosophies as mere error, thrown into the shadow of the finally revealed objective 'truth' of historical materialism. Gramsci responds that

to judge the whole of past philosophy as delirium and folly is not only an anti-historical error in that it makes the anachronistic claim that people in the past should have thought as we do today; it is also a real hang-over from metaphysics in that it presumes a dogmatic form of thought, valid at all times and in all countries, in the light of which the past can be judged. Methodical anti-historicism is sheer metaphysics.¹⁶²

- iii. Bukharin does not have an understanding of the new dialectic introduced by Marx, because he dogmatically asserts the division of Marxism into

a theory of history and politics conceived as sociology—i.e. one that can be constructed according to the methods of natural science (experimental in the crudest positivist sense); and on the other hand a philosophy proper, which would be philosophical or metaphysical or mechanical (vulgar) materialism.¹⁶³

In this case, dialectics are reduced to 'sub-species of formal logic and elementary scholastics',¹⁶⁴ rather than grasped as the 'real' critique of a philosophy: that is, a theory of the modification of the conditions of possibility of philosophy through the elaboration of a class's project in a hegemonic apparatus. As Gramsci repeatedly insists, the philosophy of

¹⁶¹ Q 11, §14; *SPN*, p. 437.

¹⁶² Q 11, §18; *SPN*, p. 449.

¹⁶³ Q 11, §22; *SPN*, p. 434. Gramsci also provides a second, political explanation for Bukharin's failure to comprehend dialectics. 'The second origin would appear to be psychological. It is felt that the dialectic is something arduous and difficult, in so far as thinking dialectically goes against vulgar common sense, which is dogmatic and eager for peremptory certainties and has as its expression formal logic [...] This motivation seems to me to act as a psychological brake on the author of the "Essay"; he really does capitulate before *senso comune* and vulgar thought, since he has not put the problem in exact theoretical terms and is therefore in practice disarmed and impotent. The uneducated and crude environment has dominated the educator and vulgar common sense has imposed itself on science rather than the other way round. If the environment is the educator, it too must in turn be educated, but the "Essay" does not understand this revolutionary dialectic' (Q 11, §22; *SPN*, pp. 434–5).

¹⁶⁴ Q 11, §22; *SPN*, p. 434.

praxis is not merely a theory of contradiction ('theory' understood in a speculative sense, as external description); rather, it conceives of itself as an element of contradiction in a contradictory field, a theoretical form in which the subaltern classes can become conscious of their historical conditions and struggle to transform them.¹⁶⁵

- iv. Similarly, as we will see in greater detail in Chapter Eight, Bukharin does not understand the new concept of immanence introduced by Marx. He therefore remains trapped in a pre-Kantian conception of teleology,¹⁶⁶ a search for 'first causes', for the 'cause of the causes',¹⁶⁷ and is unable to grasp the categories of the philosophy of praxis as an instance of 'revolutionary praxis'.¹⁶⁸

7.4.1. 'The philosophy of praxis is the absolute "historicism"'

Gramsci locates the cause of all these and other failings fundamentally in Bukharin's proposition that historical materialism is a variant of the modern philosophical tradition. The category of matter functions as an ultimate guarantee of Marxism's veracity. For Bukharin, we could say, Marxism is merely 'Soviets + (a very particular conception of) modern science'; just as electricity had a instrumental/technical relation to the institutions of workers' democracy in Lenin's original formulation, so science in Bukharin's conception ultimately has a functionalist relation, as guarantee, to Marxist theory.¹⁶⁹ For Gramsci, on the other hand, such insurance is bought at too high a price: namely, the continuation of precisely those expressions of the experience of subalternity and passivity that the philosophy of praxis labours to transform into an active and directive relation to the world. As Frosini argues,

¹⁶⁵ Cf. *Q 10II*, §41.

¹⁶⁶ *Q 11*, §23.

¹⁶⁷ *Q 11*, §15; *SPN*, p. 438.

¹⁶⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ As we will see in Section 8.1., Gramsci objection to Bukharin's conception of modern science was not based on any 'anti-scientism'; on the contrary, what Gramsci found most objectionable in Bukharin's naïve transposition of concepts supposedly derived from the natural sciences to the terrain of human history was precisely the lack of seriousness or real knowledge of the complexity of modern scientific practice. Cf. the treatment of modern atomic theory in *Q 11*, §30 and Section III of *Q 11*, particularly the following formulation: 'together with the most superficial infatuation for the sciences, there exists [in Bukharin's presentation] in reality the greatest ignorance about scientific facts and methods' (*Q 11*, §39; *FSPN*, pp. 294–5).

crude, vulgar materialism, for Gramsci, is an ideology of subalterns: it does nothing but repeat in a different form the religious conception of the relation between man and the world as two, reciprocally foreign spheres, one of which, the world, matter, precedes man and is thus 'found' by him ready made, catalogued and unchangeable [...] in such a way, materialism perpetuates the perception that the subaltern classes have of themselves, as objects deprived of will, at the mercy of circumstance.¹⁷⁰

Gramsci's critique of vulgar materialism has been met with bewilderment or, more often, accusations of idealism, since the first publication of the *Prison Notebooks*. As we have seen, Althusser expressed particular concern that Gramsci's emphasis upon Marxism's historicism led him to neglect—or perhaps even to reject—its materialism. Althusser thereby signalled his affiliation to Marxist 'orthodoxy', even as he attempted to renovate it. For the proponents of Diamat, of course, Gramsci's argument remained similarly incomprehensible when not a direct affront.

7.4.2. *Historical materialism*

In truth, these critics, just as Bukharin, do not understand that the philosophy of praxis's equation of philosophy, history and politics has redefined the category of matter, alongside all the other categories from the metaphysical tradition, in a realistic and historical sense. Rather than neglecting it, Gramsci in fact attempts to translate the concept of 'matter' itself into his theory of the superstructures or ideologies, as an operative form of knowledge that expresses humanity's *active* relation with nature.

It is evident that for the philosophy of praxis, 'matter' should be understood neither in the meaning that it has acquired in natural science (physics, chemistry, mechanics, etc.—meanings to be noted and studied in their historical development), nor in any of the meanings that one finds in the various materialistic metaphysics. The various physical (chemical, mechanical, etc.) properties of matter which together constitute matter itself (unless one is to fall back on a conception of the Kantian noumenon) should be considered, but only to the extent that they become a productive 'economic element'.

¹⁷⁰ Frosini 2003, p. 87.

Matter is therefore not to be considered as such, but as socially and historically organised for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially an historical category, a human relation.¹⁷¹

Thus, when Gramsci argues, in a definitive appropriation of the Crocean concept in order to describe his own position, that

it has been forgotten that in the case of a very common expression one should put the accent on the first term—‘historical’—and not on the second, which is of metaphysical origin,¹⁷²

this should be understood strictly and literally; as the ‘the absolute “historicism”, the absolute secularisation and earthliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history’,¹⁷³ the philosophy of praxis can explain, overcome and incorporate, rather than merely dismiss, the contradictions both of metaphysical idealism *and* of metaphysical materialism. Far from being an idealism or anti-materialism, Gramsci explicitly confirms that the philosophy of praxis is an ‘*historical* materialism’.

7.4.3. ‘The so-called objectivity of the external world’

Similar objections have been made against Gramsci’s critique of the ‘objectivity of the external world’,¹⁷⁴ or the ‘so-called reality of the external world’.¹⁷⁵ Here, we confront one of the most difficult elements of the philosophy of praxis.

¹⁷¹ Q 11, §30; SPN, pp. 465–6. A prime illustration of this thesis is to be found in Gramsci’s discussion of electricity in the same note: ‘Electricity is historically active, not merely however as a natural force (e.g. an electrical discharge which causes a fire) but as a productive element dominated by man and incorporated into the ensemble of the material forces of production, an object of private property. As an abstract natural force electricity existed even before its reduction to a productive force, but it was not historically operative and was just a subject of hypothetical discourse in natural history (earlier still it was historical “nothingness”, since no one was interested in it or indeed knew anything about it)’ (Q 11, §30; SPN, pp. 466–7). Gramsci’s critique of vulgar materialism is therefore properly seen as an eminently Marxist proposition to analyse the social relations that constitute reality [*Wirklichkeit*] historically, rather than a departure from any supposed ‘orthodoxy’.

¹⁷² Q 11, §27; SPN, p. 465.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ This is the title of Q 11, §34; SPN, p. 446.

¹⁷⁵ Q 11, §17; SPN, pp. 440–6.

Diamat helped to confirm the suspicions of many generations of Marxists of any critique of its 'static' concept of matter. In the case of Gramsci's critique of the ideology of 'objectivism', however, little encouragement was required, for 'there is hardly any other idea of the philosophy of consciousness that has so thoroughly entered into *senso comune* as a "matter of fact" than the idea of an "inner" to which corresponds an "outer"'.¹⁷⁶ As Gramsci himself notes,

the popular public does not think that a problem such as whether the external world exists objectively can even be asked. One just has to enunciate the problem in these terms to provoke an irresistible and gargantuan outburst of laughter.¹⁷⁷

Gramsci nevertheless does confront this problem in the *Prison Notebooks*, and places it at the centre of the philosophy of praxis's 'realistic' explanation of the 'subjectivist conception of the world' in the theory of the superstructures/ideologies.¹⁷⁸ Some critics have felt authorised to talk of 'Gramsci's idealist notion that the existence of the external world is dependent upon human cognition'.¹⁷⁹ In truth, as Roth insists,

the investigations of the concepts of 'objectivity' and 'reality' [*Wirklichkeit*] take up a central place in the *Prison Notebooks*, such that without a very exact examination of them Gramsci's philosophy simply cannot be understood.¹⁸⁰

Gramsci poses the question in an entirely different register from that of the 'existence' or not of an 'external' reality, or the primacy or creativity of

¹⁷⁶ Haug 2006, p. 48. As Haug notes in one of the most sophisticated commentaries on this theme in the *Prison Notebooks*, the assertion of the 'obviousness' of the objectivity of the world is in fact premised upon a thoroughly subjectivist and ultimately religious conception of reality. 'The "subject" is then an "inner", the object an "outer". This relationship is thought above all as an act of seeing, and it is natural that the things that are to be seen are there, independently of the act of seeing'. Haug follows Gramsci in proposing 'praxis [as] the alternative to the immanence of consciousness with the transcendence of the external world; in praxis there is an organic interconnection between thought and being, between efficacy [*Wirken*] and reality [*Wirklichkeit*]' (Haug 2006, p. 48).

¹⁷⁷ Q 11, §17; *SPN*, p. 441.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ McLennan 1981, p. 23. cf. also Callinicos 1983, p. 73: 'Profoundly influenced by Croce, Gramsci went so far as to deny the existence of a reality independent of human consciousness and actions'.

¹⁸⁰ Roth 1972, p. 48.

consciousness. Instead, he investigates the historical reason why the world appears to us as 'objectively' given, as an 'object' confronting our own 'subjectivities'.

The public 'believes' that the external world is objectively real, but it is precisely here that the question arises: what is the origin of this 'belief' and what critical value does it 'objectively' have? In fact the belief is of religious origin, even if the man who shares it is indifferent to religion. Since all religions have taught and do teach that the world, nature, the universe were created by God before the creation of man, and therefore man found the world all ready made, catalogued and defined once and for all, this belief has become an iron fact of '*senso comune*' and survives with the same solidity even if religious feeling is dead or asleep [...] Does it seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity? But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of 'standpoint of the cosmos in itself' and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God, precisely in its mystical conception of an unknown God.¹⁸¹

Fundamentally, Gramsci finds *this* concept of objectivity (an 'objectivist objectivity', we could say), like the concept of matter of vulgar materialism, to be an expression of the experience of subalternity. For a social group devoid of historical initiative, confined to the corporative level of civil society in the integral state of another class, the world can indeed appear as 'given', or rather, 'imposed'. The religious 'residue' then takes on a precise political function: it encourages acceptance of 'objectification' by the 'subject' of the ruling class, the 'inner' that looks (down) upon the subaltern classes' 'outer', which in its turn stares back in misrecognition and incomprehension.

Gramsci's alternative is not to propose an equally subjectivist valorisation of the creativity of consciousness, or to relapse, as some critics have supposed, into a variant of subjective idealism. Rather, it is to insist that we are not merely 'thrown' into a world that is simply given to us, but that the reality we really do know and live is constituted by our social relations and our equally social relations with nature. 'We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also a becoming

¹⁸¹ Q 11, § 17; *SPN*, pp. 441–5.

and so is objectivity'.¹⁸² Gramsci's critique of Bukharin's dogmatic assertion of the 'objectivity' of the 'external' world therefore does not aim to prove the self-defeating thesis of the non-existence of reality or the merely 'subjective' dimension of our knowledge. Rather, it is a struggle for a different, more 'scientific' concept of objectivity as an index of the always already *active* nature of human knowledge and being in the world.¹⁸³ The primacy of movement over the static means that even and especially passivity is thus analysed as a social relation we must actively construct, in relation to other equally active social relations. Significantly, Gramsci draws explicitly upon Engels to support this position, in a salutary corrective to those tendencies that have dismissed the latter figure as corrupted by the vulgar 'scientism' of his epoch.

Engels's formulation that 'the unity of the world consists in its materiality demonstrated [...] by the long and laborious development of philosophy and natural science' contains the germ of the correct conception in that it has recourse to history and to man in order to demonstrate objective reality. Objective always means 'humanly objective', which can be held to correspond exactly to 'historically subjective': in other words, objective would mean 'universal subjective'. Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race historically unified in a single unitary cultural system. But this process of historical unification takes place through the disappearance of the internal contradictions that tear apart human society, while these contradictions themselves are the condition for the formation of groups and for the birth of ideologies which are not concretely universal but

¹⁸² Q 11, § 17; *SPN*, p. 446.

¹⁸³ "'Objective" means this and only this: that one assents to be objective, to be objective reality, that reality which is ascertained by all, which is independent of any merely particular or group standpoint. But, basically, this too is a particular conception of the world, an ideology. However, this conception, when taken in its entirety, can be accepted by the philosophy of praxis because of the direction it indicates' (Q 11, 37; *FSPN*, p. 291). As Haug notes, 'why does "that which is there" appear to us as an "external world"? Do we not experience it also as an element of the world in which we are? And isn't our being in the world an active being [*Tätig-sein*]?' (Haug 2006, p. 48). Or as Žižek has noted in relation to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and its 'residues' in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, 'only a consciousness observing the reality from outside the world would see the whole of reality "the way it really is" [...], just as a mirror can reflect an object perfectly only if it is external to it. [...] The point is not that there is an independent reality out there, outside myself; the point is that I myself am "out there", part of that reality' (Žižek 2002, 179–80). For further treatments of Gramsci's critique of objectivism, cf. Roth 1972 for an account of hegemony as 'intersubjectivity', and Nemeth 1980 for a phenomenological reading.

are immediately rendered transient by the practical origin of their substance. There exists therefore a struggle for objectivity (to free oneself from partial and fallacious ideologies) and this struggle is the same as the struggle for the cultural unification of the human race. What the idealists call 'spirit' is not a point of departure but a point of arrival, it is the ensemble of the superstructures moving towards concrete and objectively universal unification and not a unitary presupposition etc.¹⁸⁴

The philosophy of praxis therefore insists upon its necessarily partial and incomplete nature, as the theoretical expression of an historical subjectivity that wants to help create the conditions of a genuinely human objectivity, that is, a 'universal subjectivity'. Its truth, in other words, is located in the world rather than transcending it. As a mode of knowing the world from within it, 'immanently', it challenges both the metaphysical materialism of Bukharin and the idealist traditions of Western philosophy by offering a radically alternative conception of the relationship between thought and being. Gramsci's proposal, which we will examine in the following chapter, is that it is only by elaborating the full implications of this conception that the philosophy of praxis will be able to be adequate to the expansive and paedagogic dimensions necessary for proletarian hegemony.

¹⁸⁴ Q 11, § 17; *SPN*, pp. 445–6. Gramsci further notes: 'Up to now experimental science has provided the terrain on which a cultural unity of this kind has reached its furthest extension. This has been the element of knowledge that has contributed most to unifying the "spirit" and making it more universal. It is the most objectivised and concretely universalised subjectivity' (Q 11, § 17; *SPN*, p. 446). Cf. the following chapter for an examination of the significance of this valorisation of science.

Chapter Eight

‘The Absolute Secularisation and Earthliness of Thought’

Die Frage, ob dem menschlichen Denken gegenständliche Wahrheit zukomme—ist keine Frage der Theorie, sondern eine *praktische* Frage. In der Praxis muß der Mensch die Wahrheit, i.e. Wirklichkeit und Macht, Diesseitigkeit seines Denkens beweisen. Der Streit über die Wirklichkeit oder Nichtwirklichkeit des Denkens—das von der Praxis isoliert ist—ist eine rein *scholastische* Frage.

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth—i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. (Second Thesis on Feuerbach.)¹

When Marx wrote that ‘Man must prove the truth—i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice’, he declared his simultaneous rejection of a metaphysics of ‘Truth’ just as much

¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 3.

as a relativist liquidation of it into so many 'beautiful lies'. For Marx, there exists neither an external criterion of a 'beyond' to which we might make appeal, as a guarantee of our certainties or confirmation of our delusions, nor a subjectivist interiority that 'authorises', in all senses of the word. Yet, having dispensed with these traditional solutions, Marx does not dissolve the question of truth into a banal pragmatics. Rather, truth is brought down to earth, just 'as Prometheus' stole 'fire from heaven',² as an internal grade of reality [*Wirklichkeit*] and power [*Macht*] traversing our practices from within. The pretensions of the metaphysical tradition to negate the self-constituting reality of 'this side of paradise' are thereby deflated; but, so too, is the overweening pride of those anti-metaphysical perspectives that implicitly and paradoxically accept the paradigmatically metaphysical assertion that no truth is to be found in this vale of tears when they dispense completely with the category of truth as a touchstone of thought and action.

All of Gramsci's philosophical research in the *Prison Notebooks* could be regarded as an extended and multifaceted meditation upon this, the second of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. As we have seen, Gramsci's absolutely historicist comprehension of the status of philosophy aimed to combat any manifestation of metaphysics, even and especially its residues, as politically debilitating for the practice of proletarian hegemony. Viewed from the perspective of the history of philosophy, this involves thinking

a philosophical affirmation as true in a particular historical period (that is, as the necessary and inseparable expression of a particular historical action, of a particular praxis), while at the same time recognising that it can be superseded and rendered 'vain' in a succeeding period.³

Bukharin could not attain to this 'quite arduous and difficult mental operation' of comprehending 'philosophy as historicity', and thus fell backwards into a variant of the metaphysical positions, positing an abstract-universal 'outside of time and space',⁴ an 'supra-historical [truth]'.⁵ Just as for Marx, truth for

² Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 1, p. 491.

³ Q 11, § 14; *SPN*, p. 436.

⁴ Q 11, § 14; *SPN*, p. 437.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Gramsci was necessarily of and within history, *diesseits* of any metaphysical utopia that had been deprived of its magical power to help or pardon the imperfections of a world fallen from itself.

Reading '*Capital*' commended Gramsci's anti-metaphysical intentions and recognised them as essential for any comprehension of the status of Marxist philosophy. Gramsci had indicated

the site on which the Marxist conception should be established and the direction it should take in order to break all ties with the previous metaphysics: the site of 'immanence', of the 'down here' which Marx himself opposed as '*diesseits*' (down-here) to transcendence, the beyond (*jenseits*) of classical philosophies.⁶

For Althusser, however, the 'absolutely historicist' practice of philosophy proposed by Gramsci as effecting a rupture with the presuppositions of the prior philosophical tradition remained incapable of distinguishing Marxism from 'ideological "conceptions of the world"'. It was not enough for Marxist philosophy merely to reject all 'residues' of metaphysics, or any system that posited a separation between thought and being and resulted in autonomy, if not a determinant position, being ascribed to the former. Instead, 'dialectical materialism' demonstrated its superiority to prior philosophies by being the first philosophy to found itself *adequately* upon a genuine science, thereby 'elevating' the validity of science into the very form of philosophy itself. Thus Althusser argued that the genuinely post-metaphysical dimensions of Marxism consisted less in

the (important) formal difference that Marxism puts an end to any supra-terrestrial 'beyond', than [in] the distinctive *form* of this absolute immanence (its 'earthliness'): *the form of scientificity*.⁷

Gramsci, on the other hand, according to Althusser, was 'little concerned with science', ranging it indifferently alongside other 'conceptions of the world' and ideologies, giving way to an 'empiricist temptation' that was ultimately a variant of idealism.⁸

⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 127.

⁷ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 131.

⁸ Labica notes that Althusser's valorisation of science and rejection of Gramsci's historicism owes at least something to differences between national intellectual cultures:

8.1. Althusserian science

The type of ‘scientificity’ to which Althusser referred was, of course, of a particularly distinctive nature that has little to do with traditions of positivism or empiricism, or what is disparagingly referred to as ‘scientism’—in other words, traditions for which a certain type of science functions as a ‘first philosophy’. A science, for the early Althusser, could only be identified retrospectively, after it had emerged from a sea of ideologies. It came into being as a function of an ‘epistemological break’ with such ideologies that had sought to comprehend, though incorrectly, the same objects which were now adequately grasped by the new science. In fact, the establishment of the new science also (re-) established the field of the ideological. As G.M. Goshgarian has noted, ‘the positions staked out in *For Marx* and *Reading “Capital”*’ were

commanded by the thesis, adapted from Gaston Bachelard, that the major sciences had emerged from revolutionary ‘epistemological breaks’ with the practically motivated systems of thought that their emergence retrospectively identified as ideologies.⁹

The emergence of a science, however, was only the beginning of a long process of theoretical labour. Existing only ‘in a practical state’, a new science still needed to be elaborated, refined and reinforced with the theoretical resources that could help it keep its head above the surrounding ideological waters. This

‘on the one hand, the historicist tradition that goes back to Vico; on the other hand, the scientist tradition, strongly marked by the materialism of the eighteenth century and the concomitant deficit of dialectics, noted by Engels. This was the background for Althusser’s “reservations” regarding the Gramscian interpretation of dialectical materialism [...] and the parallel he established between Gramsci and Jean-Paul Sartre. Similarly, this was the background for Althusser’s rigorous maintenance of the distinction dialectical materialism/historical materialism and reproval of Gramsci for having undervalued the relation of philosophy with science.’ (Labica 1995, pp. 47–53). Althusser himself rejected priority being given to differences in national traditions as a sociological relativism derived directly from bourgeois ideology (Althusser 1971b, p. 344). Be that as it may, as previously noted, Althusser’s remarks also connected with an Italian tradition, echoing Mario Tronti’s earlier critique from the post-Della-Volpean conjuncture and its strident rejection of the prior Italian historicist tradition. Tronti argued that philosophy remains the mode of knowledge *par excellence* for Gramsci, whereas the Marx of *Capital*, according to Tronti, tends towards science. Cf. Tronti 1959. For Althusser’s reference to Tronti, cf. Althusser and Balibar, p. 120.

⁹ Goshgarian 2003, p. xii.

task fell above all to the new philosophy that emerged in the wake of the new science, theorising its practice. As Goshgarian again argues,

a science depended for its continued existence on the philosophical 'guide' that depended on it. Unless it was armed by philosophy with the theory of its own theoretical practice, any science, although its discoveries were irreversible, had to fear the 'constantly recurring ideological temptations' that could always reverse it, drawing it back within the embrace of the ideology from which it had torn itself.¹⁰

In Spinozist terms, philosophy in this conception played the role of the *idea* of the 'body' of science, which was then in turn redefined as the *ideatum* of the philosophy that theorised it.¹¹ Those critics who condemned the theoretical structure of *Reading 'Capital'* as an instance of rationalism valorising 'Theory' over concrete knowledge of the world should have paid closer attention to the letter of the text. The early Althusser establishes a relationship of mutual implication between science and philosophy in which science is the determining moment, in the first and not the last instance: without philosophy, a science besieged by ideologies, but still a science; without science, no philosophy.

This 'untimeliness' of philosophy, however, was not distinctive to the relationship between Marxist science (historical materialism) and Marxist philosophy (dialectical materialism). The 'Althusserian variation on the theme that the owl of Minerva takes wing at dusk', as Goshgarian has called it, had a more general validity in the history of philosophy.¹² According to Althusser, all philosophies maintained this temporal relation with the sciences that called them forth.

¹⁰ Goshgarian 2003, p. xiii.

¹¹ For the late Althusser, on the other hand, 'philosophy has no object', in the sense that 'this philosophy is, in sum, a philosophy of the *void*: not only a philosophy which says the void that pre-exists the atoms that fall within it, but a philosophy which *creates the philosophical void* in order to endow itself with existence: a philosophy which, rather than setting out from the famous "philosophical problems" ("why is there something rather than nothing?"), *begins by evacuating all philosophical problems*, hence by refusing to assign itself any "object" whatsoever ("philosophy has no object"), in order to set out from *nothing*, and from this infinitesimal, aleatory variation of nothing constituted by the swerve of the fall' (Althusser 2006, pp. 174–5).

¹² Goshgarian 2003, p. xiii.

The foundation of mathematics by Thales [had] ‘induced’ the birth of the Platonic philosophy, just as the foundation of physics by Galileo [had] ‘induced’ the birth of Cartesian philosophy.¹³

One of the features distinguishing the ‘new, theoretically and practically revolutionary philosophy, Marxist philosophy or dialectical materialism’¹⁴ from all philosophy hitherto was that, for the first time in human history, there could potentially be a philosophy that comprehended rather than distorted the full import of the specific science upon which it was founded. Plato’s philosophy had been constructed by unwarrantedly extending theorisations based upon the discovery of the ‘continent of mathematics’ to other phenomena (most grievously, the social order); Galileo’s opening up of the continent of physical nature for scientific knowledge had been compromised by Descartes’s transposition of its mechanical logic to the study of the human mind. Finally, after so many mimetic failures and resultant ideological apologetics for the established state of affairs, Marx’s sighting of the continent of history and foundation of the ‘science of social formations’ provided an historical opportunity for philosophy to take cognisance of its *ideatum* and produce the *idea* that comprehended its essence. It was an adequate ‘theoretical practice’ that would ensure that dialectical materialism would be no mutilated imitation of this science but an elevation of its principles within the form of philosophy itself.

8.1.2. Spectres of Bukharin

Gramsci, it is true, was indeed ‘little concerned’ with this particular definition of science and its relationship to philosophy, for the simple reason that it was not available to him. If it had been, the primacy accorded to science in this model would perhaps have struck him as posited upon the implicit assertion of a unilateral and homogenising concept of scientificity. Despite his appeal to the history of science, Althusser’s concept of science permits, in the last instance, no distinction between different sciences, their differential times and superstructural dimensions: *qua* sciences, they are constituted on the terrain of the ‘scientific’, which is just as ahistorical as the terrain of the ‘ideological’. This certainly seems to represent a very different conceptual

¹³ Althusser 1969, p. 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

structure from that implicit in *Historical Materialism*, criticised so thoroughly in the *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci argued that Bukharin's concept of science, 'is taken root and branch from the natural sciences, as if these were the only sciences or science *par excellence*, as decreed by positivism'.¹⁵ Yet, at other moments, Gramsci noted, Bukharin also invoked science to signify 'a method in general',¹⁶ existing independently from and indifferently applicable to any content. At this level, there are decisive similarities between Bukharin's and Althusser's conceptions: both conceive of a scientific 'genus', or paradigm of scientificity, which is instantiated in the 'species' of the individual sciences and is the criterion by which they, *qua* sciences, are to be judged; both argue for a temporal relation between (Marxist) science and (Marxist) philosophy, which emerges from science, as its theoretical 'consciousness'; both implicitly posit a variant of a Lockean 'underlabourer' conception of the relationship between science and philosophy, with the latter working to purify and guarantee the conceptual instruments of the former.

Gramsci argued that such tendencies derived from an inexact understanding of the nature of Marx's contribution to the 'class struggle in theory', a contribution that redefined both science and philosophy in terms of their ideological efficacy. Rather than ranging science indifferently alongside other 'conceptions of the world', he explicitly distinguished it from them. In his distinctive, positive yet critical, reformulation of the concept of ideology, Gramsci insisted upon the specificity of scientific practice,¹⁷ as one of the most historically efficacious of human ways of 'knowing' the world. Equally, and at the same time, he also insisted upon its status as a 'superstructure', of a very particular type. If Gramsci's primary concern in this operation is to defend the philosophical autonomy of the philosophy of praxis, it also has determinant effects upon the conception of science, freeing it from the need to make ultimately metaphysical claims that scientific practice itself regularly contradicts. Gramsci argues that

to make science the basis of life, to make science into a conception of the world means falling back into the concept that historical materialism needs another support outside of itself. Science too is a superstructure.¹⁸

¹⁵ Q 11, §15; *SPN*, p. 438.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Cf. Section 7.4.3.

¹⁸ Q 4, §7; cf. Q 11, §38; *FSPN*, p. 293.

If there is indeed 'a method in general', it would ultimately be, according to Gramsci, 'philosophy'.¹⁹ Philosophy alone—understood in the non-speculative and politically overdetermined sense we have examined in the previous chapter—has the capacity to be a 'conception of the world' or an 'intellectual order',²⁰ that is, an ensemble of superstructures of a class project, within which different scientific practices can be undertaken. One of the elements that distinguishes the philosophy of praxis from other philosophies is its capacity to promote a more coherent and less contradictory scientific practice, insofar as it is a conception of the world that aims to contribute to the resolution of contradictions on the social and political terrain upon which science occurs. Similarly, the philosophy of praxis, as we have seen, valorises science as the ideological 'terrain' that has most contributed towards uniting humanity in a cultural system that recognises none of the boundaries imposed by class society.²¹

Nevertheless, Gramsci is insistent that only philosophy can constitute an 'intellectual order' in a practical sense, as the hegemonic apparatus of a class that wants to transform society, because philosophy constitutes the genus to science's (any science's) species. For this reason, Marxism cannot be reduced to a science, not even a social science or a 'science of politics' or a 'set of theses for a science of political practice'.²² A practical, active and ongoing relationship with science is, for the most part, the preserve of professional intellectuals in the capitalist division of labour; workers, on the other hand, *qua* workers, experience this type of 'science' as something imposed upon them in the labour process 'from the outside', as an instance of technical organisation. A 'Marxism' that proposed itself as 'science' *in this way* would merely reproduce the most deleterious dimensions of religion as an incoherent (non-) intellectual order. In other words, it could only demand a passive acceptance or obedience, in a relation of *faith* and not of knowledge. It would not be implicated as a moment of immanent critique of *senso comune*, but would be merely its external negation, or management 'from above'. If science is to penetrate down into *senso comune*, assisting in its transformation into a *buon senso*, it must do so as an element of a broader 'conception of the world', a role which philosophy alone—in its expansive sense, as a practice of coherence—can comprehend.

¹⁹ Q 11, § 15; SPN, p. 438.

²⁰ Q 11, § 12; SPN, p. 325 et sqq.

²¹ Cf. Q 11, § 17; SPN, p. 446.

²² Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 346.

8.1.3. The kernel of the philosophy of praxis

Far from being 'little interested in science', Gramsci ascribes a particularly important status to it. Discussions of science—not merely theoretical reflection on it, but analysis of technical problems and procedures—are a central recurring theme of the *Prison Notebooks*.²³ Particularly important in this regard was a formulation from Engels's *Anti-Dühring*, which Gramsci recruited on a number of occasions in order to strengthen his critique of 'objectivist' tendencies in Second-International Marxism.

The materiality of the world is demonstrated by the long and laborious development of philosophy and the natural sciences.²⁴

The synthesis of the theoretical and practical-experimental activity of scientists provides

the typical unitary process of the real, in the experimental activity of the scientists that is the first model of the dialectical mediation between man and nature, the elementary historical cell by means of which man, positing himself in relation with science through technology, knows it and dominates it.²⁵

Gramsci goes so far as to argue that the putting into practice of the modern scientific experimental method

separates two historical worlds, two epochs, and initiates the process of dissolution of theology and metaphysics and the process of development of modern thought whose consummation is in the philosophy of praxis. Scientific experiment is the first cell of the new method of production, of the new form of active union of man and nature.²⁶

In certain respects, the 'scientist-experimenter' becomes the forerunner or even prototype of the new type of philosopher of the philosophy of praxis, insofar

²³ Cf. e.g. the discussion of the postulate in the mathematical sciences in Q 26, §7.

²⁴ Q 11, §34: cf. Q 4, §47. Engels's complete formulation reads as follows: 'The real unity of the world consists in its materiality, and this is proved not by a few juggled phrases, but by a long and wearisome development of philosophy and natural science' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 25, p. 41).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

as both are not 'pure thinkers', but also 'workers'; their 'thought is continually controlled by practice and vice versa, until there is formed the perfect unity of theory and practice'.²⁷

8.1.4. Under the shadow of Croce

The importance that Gramsci ascribes to science was due, in part, to his critique of Croce and Gentile, whom he criticised 'precisely for having isolated natural and exact scientists from the world of culture'.²⁸ Croce, in particular, dismissed the natural sciences as, in effect, pseudo-sciences, 'collections of pseudo-concepts, and precisely that form of pseudo-concepts that we have named empirical or representative'.²⁹ Gramsci had theoretical reasons to object to this attack, particularly given his critique of the 'pseudo-realism' of Croce's purification of Hegel. He also recognised that, however, in an Italy still dominated by the Catholic Church, such a position could not but strengthen positions, both theoretical and political, that were less concerned with the complexities of post-Hegelian thought than with resisting the secularising, modernist impulses that appealed to the Enlightenment and its scientific heritage. In certain contexts, it helped to strengthen tendencies towards 'Lorianism', the scholarly shoddiness and intellectual irresponsibility that Gramsci criticised as

an inorganic nature, absence of systematical critical spirit, lack of clarity in the undertaking of scientific activity, absence of cultural centralisation, laziness and ethical indulgence in the field of scientific-cultural activity.³⁰

Such an attitude prevented the growth of a genuinely national culture in general and critical elements within it, the workers' movement in particular. Championing certain forms of science as the potential bearers of a rational modernity was thus simultaneously both a theoretical and political intervention.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Q 14, §38. Boothman 1994, p. 175.

²⁹ Croce 1967, p. 212.

³⁰ Q 28, preliminary remarks.

8.1.5. 'Also science is a superstructure'

In another and more important sense, the prominence of science in the theoretical structure of the *Prison Notebooks* is also due to Gramsci's focus precisely upon its status as a superstructure. As we have seen, unlike Marx, Gramsci 'annuls the distinction [between science and ideology]' and reduces 'every form of knowledge to *ideology*',³¹ or, in other words, to superstructures. Like the other superstructures, science is one of the forms in which humans become conscious of their social conflicts, but it is distinct from many of them in terms of its particular constitution, mode of comprehension and efficacy. Science, or a particular understanding of modern scientific practice, becomes paradigmatic for Gramsci of the type of superstructure capable of producing rational and progressive transformations on the social terrain (as opposed to those that merely serve to reinforce the existing state of affairs). Immediately following the provocative declaration that 'also science is a superstructure' to which Althusser objected, Gramsci continues, arguing that

in the study of the superstructures, science occupies a privileged position since its reaction on the structure has a character of major extension and continuity of development, especially from 1700 onwards, when science obtained a position on its own in the public esteem. That science is a superstructure is also demonstrated by the fact that it has had whole periods of eclipse, obscured as it was by another dominant ideology, religion, which claimed that it had absorbed science itself; thus the science and technology of the Arabs seemed pure witchcraft to the Christians. Science never appears as a naked objective notion; it always appears in the trappings of an ideology. In concrete terms, science is the union of the objective fact with a hypothesis or system of hypotheses which go beyond the mere objective fact. It is true however that in this field it has become relatively easy to distinguish the objective notion from the system of hypotheses by means of a process of abstraction that is inherent in scientific methodology itself, in such a way that one can appropriate the one while rejecting the other. In this way one class

³¹ Frosini 2003, p. 90.

can appropriate the science of another class without accepting its ideology. This is why one social group can appropriate the science of another group without accepting its ideology.³²

Gramsci's formulation that 'objective knowledge' always appears 'in the trappings of' or 'clothed' by an ideology might seem to suggest that there is a 'hard core' of 'objective' knowledge underneath it. Some commentators have seized on this and similar passages to suggest that Gramsci sometimes makes a 'grudging surrender to realism', 'in a moment of weakness',³³ and that Gramsci therefore—perhaps, in a Straussian sense, 'esoterically'?—in reality 'subscribes to the view of the stubborn independence of reality from consciousness',³⁴ his other comments on the matter notwithstanding.³⁵ In truth, Gramsci's insistence that 'science never appears as a naked objective notion; it always appears in the trappings of an ideology' is merely designed to emphasise that science is *always* an active human relation of knowledge, never objectively given or guaranteed independently of the humans who practise it. The 'process of abstraction', 'inherent to scientific methodology', implicitly acknowledges science's status as a superstructure, in other words its historicity, its emergence in a determinate historical and social context, and thus the need for continual retesting and correction of previously affirmed theses. It is not because it gives access to 'naked' objective knowledge, but because it is the active appropriation of the world within determinate contexts and for particular goals that Gramsci argues modern science has made a decisive contribution to the elaboration of the philosophy of praxis. As Frosini notes, 'the privileged relation that

³² Q 4, §7; cf. Q 11, §38; written in May 1930.

³³ Morera 1990, p. 40.

³⁴ Morera 1990, p. 39.

³⁵ For Morera, Gramsci's philosophy of *praxis* is, in reality, merely a 'sociology of philosophy', which leaves intact the 'real philosophy', which deals with properly philosophical i.e. 'metaphysical' questions. 'This conception of historicized philosophy does not deny the other philosophy, that is, the basic logical, ontological, and epistemological conceptual frameworks with which professional philosophers deal most of the time' (Morera 1990, p. 185). In a similar vein, cf. Joseph 2002. This interpretation, based upon a decontextualised reading of certain passages, may succeed in making Gramsci's 'politico-gnoseological thesis' of human knowledge as social relations more acceptable to recent 'epistemologically'-oriented approaches, such as critical realism; but it is a thesis easily refuted by the integral meaning of Gramsci's formulations.

historical materialism maintains with modern science goes by this way: for the *methodological* values it elaborates, that is to say, for the active and correlative conception of knowledge and objectivity'.³⁶

Nevertheless, when Gramsci argued that the philosophy of praxis is the 'secularisation and absolute worldliness of thought',³⁷ (thus implicitly referring to the second of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, whose key term *Diesseitigkeit* [this-sidedness] Gramsci had translated in 1927 as '*carattere terreno* [wordly character]'), he was not, in the first instance, concerned with Marxism's relation to modern science. Rather, he sought to emphasise Marxism's distinctiveness as a philosophy, which provides a qualitatively new way of posing the perennial question of the relation of theory and practice. Rather than being a merely practical and critical concept to indicate an orientation leading elsewhere³⁸—namely, towards scientificity—Gramsci's 'absolute immanence' is precisely that orientation, the very way in which the Marxism practises philosophy in a resolutely non-metaphysical way, as a philosophy of praxis. Once again, it will be necessary to track the dialectical emergence of this orientation in the unfolding of Gramsci's entire research project.

8.2. Traces of immanence

Gramsci was initially stimulated to attempt to specify the meaning of the concept of immanence for the Marxist tradition in early summer of 1930 while reflecting upon Bukharin's *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (a text that he often refers to as the 'Popular Essay'). He observed that

in the *Popular Essay* it is noted that Marx adopts the expression 'immanence', 'immanent' and it is said that evidently this use is 'metaphoric'.³⁹

³⁶ Frosini 2003, p. 88; cf. Roth 1972, p. 53.

³⁷ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 465.

³⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 127.

³⁹ Q 4, §17. Gramsci's first reference to Marx's new concept of immanence occurred several notes earlier in the same notebook, without explicit reference to Bukharin: 'When one says that Marx adopts the expression "immanence" in a metaphorical sense, one says nothing: in reality, Marx gives the term "immanence" his own meaning, he isn't, that is, a "pantheist" in the traditional metaphysical sense, but a "Marxist" or

By ‘metaphoric’, Gramsci understands Bukharin to mean a ‘formal’ appropriation of the word without taking over the substantive content of prior uses of the term in the Western philosophical tradition; in effect, an arbitrary adoption of a mere word in order to describe processes distinct from those it had previously been used to comprehend.

Such a metaphorical appropriation of the word ‘immanence’ is not without precedent. Derived from the Latin compound verb *in/manere* [to remain within], the term ‘immanence’, as the opposite of ‘transcendence’, has entered into philosophical (and also everyday) discourse to such an extent that it is often taken to be one of the most ancient and venerable concepts of the Western philosophical tradition. In a generic sense, without an etymologically direct connection to the modern concept, precursors of the modern concept of immanence could be found in a variety of undifferentiated sources in ancient Greek philosophy. Traditionally, however, the history of philosophy has traced the term back to Aristotle, who used the term *ἐνυπάρχειν* to describe constitutive inherence, both in a logical sense of a predicate’s belonging to a subject and in the sense of an action that has its end within itself,⁴⁰ as opposed to those that produce effects beyond themselves. The distinction is central to Aristotle’s differentiation between *kínesis* and *ἐνέργεια*, as transitive and intransitive (or ‘immanent’) actions.⁴¹ It is also constitutive for the opposition of *praxis* and *poíesis* that traverses all of his thought, political and ethical in particular: *praxis*, for Aristotle, is the form of action of the citizen of the polis, that is, the free man; *poíesis*, on the other hand, is reserved for poets, artists and all others who ‘work’, or rather, ‘produce’.

However, it was in fact only with the scholastic reading of this latter opposition that the concept of immanence began slowly to emerge as a distinct category of philosophical reflection defining and defined by its own particular problematic (notably, the substantive is not to be found in classical Latin, and the scholastic use itself only deployed the adjective). For the scholastic vocabulary, an *actio immanens* is an action that remains within the agent perform-

“historical materialist”. In this expression “historical materialism” major weight has been given to the second word, while it should be given to the first: Marx is essentially an “historicist” etc.’ (Q 4, § 11).

⁴⁰ Aristotle, IX, 8, 1050 a 34.

⁴¹ Aristotle, IX, 6, 1048 b 15.

ing it; an *actio transiens*, on the other hand, produces effects on an object that lies beyond the performing agent. It was precisely in this sense that Spinoza, in the wake of the Renaissance pantheism of Bruno and others, further developed the concept of immanence in terms of causal relations. Spinoza described *Deus sive natura* as the *causa immanens*, not *transiens*, of all things:⁴² as the one substance includes everything, an object of God's actions separate from Him is inconceivable, just as an effect of such actions that is not already a part of their cause, i.e. God Himself, is impossible. Thus was established a notion of 'immanence', defined in opposition to 'transcendence', as a 'this-worldliness' associated with secularising tendencies in modern science and opposed to theological constructions. To a large extent, this remains the most commonly invoked sense of the term in popular usage.

The newly forged concept of immanence, however, was to undergo further transformations in the 'technical' vocabulary of modern and particularly post-critical philosophy. In the age that sought to think the absolute not only as substance but also as subject, Kant adopted 'metaphorically' the scholastic terminology in order to define a central proposition of his 'Copernican Revolution': in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'immanent' are those 'principles [of the pure understanding] whose application is confined entirely within the limits of possible experience'; transcendent principles, on the other hand, are those whose use go beyond such limits, 'which incite us to tear down all those boundary-fences and to seize possession of an entirely new domain which recognizes no limits of demarcation'.⁴³ The principles of the pure understanding can only be immanent to experience, however, because the transcendental capacities of pure reason have already guaranteed the unity of the understanding's disparate impressions in the absolute totality which they alone can determine. The limitation of the application of such immanent principles to possible experience, that is, is underwritten by the work of reason that goes on elsewhere, transcending them and defining their exterior.

Post-Kantian German idealism, marked by the *Pantheismusstreit*, witnessed developments that radicalised both Spinoza's 'ontological' and Kant's '(experiential-) epistemological' notions of immanence. For Fichte and Schelling, all being is posited in 'the "I" [*das Ich*]'; according to Fichte, 'critical' philosophy

⁴² EIP18.

⁴³ Kant 1933, pp. 298–9; CPR B352.

consists in the fact ‘that an absolute “I” is established that is completely undetermined and unable to be determined by anything higher. [...] In the critical system the thing is what is posited in the “I”. [...] Criticism is therefore *immanent*, because it posits everything in the “I”’.⁴⁴ Transcendent systems of thought, on the other hand, posit that being in fact exceeds the synthetic capacities of consciousness, dogmatically assuming an object that stands over and against a knowing subject. For Hegel, in Fichte’s wake, it is not the subjectivity of consciousness but the objectivity of which it is a ruse [*List*], namely, Spirit [*Geist*], that constitutes the terrain of immanence or ‘absolute worldliness’. Spirit is immanent to the world in the sense of the equivalence of ‘the rational [*das Vernunftige*]’ and ‘the real [*das Wirkliche*]’: progressively unfolding itself through the Calvary of phenomenological experience, absolute Spirit retrospectively reveals its immanence to the world that it has both constituted and of which it is the result. Finally, in the period immediately preceding Gramsci’s carceral reflections, the concept of immanence underwent a further development in Italian neo-idealism: while Croce sought to reform the Hegelian dialectic in a non-metaphysical direction by positing the complete immanence of Spirit [*Spirito*] in each and every historical moment, Gentile radicalised Fichte’s and Schelling’s concept of immanence with his actualism and his notion of the pure act as a creative force.

In most modern uses of the term, therefore, particularly following Fichte’s transformation of Kant’s epistemological principle related to experience into a valorisation of the veracity of consciousness, ‘immanence’ has implied the capacity of ‘thought’ to subsume being, by ‘dwelling within’ being as an organising or even creative function. By declaring that Marx had adopted the term ‘immanence’ in a merely metaphorical sense, therefore, Bukharin would seem to suggest that Marxism has a merely ‘arbitrary’, ‘semantic’ connection with these versions of the term, because it is fundamentally a (revolutionary) variant of modern philosophical ‘materialism’: that is, it proposes the thesis of the non-exhaustion of being by thought, assigning causal priority to the former rather than to the latter and thus acknowledging the existence of an ‘objectivity’ opposed to the merely ‘subjective’. Gramsci, on the other hand, suggests that the philosophy of praxis has anything but an arbitrary relation

⁴⁴ Fichte 1845, p. 119.

to these traditions. As an 'absolute immanence', it resolves their contradictions, translating their moments of 'truth' into an historicist register before proposing its own distinctive contribution that goes well beyond them.⁴⁵

8.2.1. The *Diesseitigkeit* of absolute immanence: theory

In the early phases of his researches (May–August 1930), Gramsci argues that there is an organic connection between prior concepts of immanence and that adopted, in a practical state, in Marx's works.

Marx continues the philosophy of immanence but he purifies it completely of its metaphysical apparatus and leads it onto the concrete terrain of history. The use is metaphorical only in the sense that the conception was sublated, developed etc.⁴⁶

Gramsci's thesis is that despite or precisely because of his connections to the prior immanentist tradition, Marx had given 'his own meaning to the term "immanence"' ⁴⁷ different from the speculative, metaphysical meaning of the pre-Marxian concept (with a few notable exceptions, to which we shall return). In this sense,

the expression 'immanence' has an exact meaning in Marx's work, and it is necessary to define it: in reality, this definition would actually be 'theory'.⁴⁸

Interestingly, however, Bukharin did not in actual fact refer to the concept of immanence, except indirectly, in the chapter title 'Teleology in General and

⁴⁵ Frosini has detected four uses of the term in both Gramsci's pre-carcer and especially prison writings, corresponding generally to the development of the concept in modern philosophy and concluding with the philosophy of praxis's novel contribution. 'The term and notion of immanence in the *Prison Notebooks* are found (1) as immanentism, general metaphysical foundation as alternative to the conception of a transcendent divinity; (2) in a Kantian sense, as limitation of knowledge to the phenomenal sphere and as non-constitutive use of reason in teleological judgement; (3) as critique of the dogmatic separation of subject and object in knowledge (the so-called reality of the external world); (4) and as principle of critique of any ideological inversion and affirmation of philosophy in terms "of an absolute immanence", of an "absolute worldliness" in close connection with the principle of the unity of theory and practice' (Frosini 2004). Cf. also Badaloni 1988 for an examination of the different senses of 'immanence' in Gramsci's intellectual development.

⁴⁶ Q 4, §17.

⁴⁷ Q 4, §11.

⁴⁸ Q 4, §17; cf. Q 11, §28; *SPN*, p. 450.

its Critique. Immanent Teleology'.⁴⁹ Instead, the 'Popular Essay' argues that 'formulations' in the works of Marx and Engels 'which externally appear to correspond to a teleological standpoint' should be understood as merely a 'metaphorical' mode of expression.⁵⁰ He does not explicitly extend his claim to the specific example of the concept of immanence.⁵¹ Inexactitude of formulation does little to alter the validity of Gramsci's critique, which still remains a legitimate specific conclusion to be drawn from Bukharin's more general claim and its presuppositions. That Gramsci should focus on the concept of immanence in particular, however, should alert us to the fact that themes of *Diesseitigkeit* and concepts in the philosophical tradition that had both embodied and frustrated them were at the forefront of his mind, for very specific and significant reasons, as we shall soon see.

Before turning to these, however, we should consider the theoretical horizon in which Gramsci inscribed his search for this new concept of immanence, and the way in which he sought to refute Bukharin's claim. For the arguments he develops as he comes to examine Bukharin's position in greater detail in Notebook Seven in 1931 and even more so in a richly articulated series of notes in Notebook Eleven, compiled in July–August 1932, have an integral relationship to this new concept of immanence. In a certain sense, they constitute a paradigmatic case study of the richness and efficacy of Marx's concept of immanence for the critique of views that remained indebted to metaphysical forms of thought. In the first instance, this involved a critique not of Bukharin's philosophical position regarding different versions of the concept of immanence in the philosophical tradition, but, rather, the linguistic presuppositions that had

⁴⁹ Bukharin 1969, pp. 13–18.

⁵⁰ Bukharin 1969, p. 18. Interestingly, Bukharin did not see fit to extend his 'metaphorical' critique to the term of 'materialism', though it also had, of course, a long pre-Marxist history, as Gramsci was not slow to note: 'Thus we have seen the term "materialism" accepted with its past content, while the term "immanence" was rejected because in the past it had a determinate historical-cultural content' (Q 8, § 171).

⁵¹ On Gramsci's reading of Bukharin's text regarding the theme of immanence, cf. Gerratana's editorial note to the critical edition (Q, p. 2633). Frosini (2004) has argued that imprecision of reference to Bukharin's text in the *Prison Notebooks* can be attributed to the fact that Gramsci in is fact referring not only to the 'Popular Essay', but also, implicitly, Bernheim's *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (important themes of which are also to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*, particularly regarding the concept of immanence). Gramsci holds that Bernheim's book is a more successful popularisation than Bukharin's (cf. Q 4, § 5; Q 7, § 24; *SPN*, p. 408), and explicitly recommends that Bernheim's method would yield a more satisfying account of the philosophy of praxis (Q 16, § 3; *SPN*, p. 415).

led him to regard metaphors as merely trivial, exterior additions to an essentially integral conceptual structure. Such an arbitrary conception of language could offer no historical analysis of the complex interaction between language, concepts and social practices. The (rhetorical) appearance of 'old' terms in new contexts could therefore only appear to such a position as indeterminate, conceptually unimportant and, at best, the result of the personal 'laziness' of an individual thinker in the task of coining new words to correspond to new concepts.⁵² Gramsci, however, recognised that 'the question of the relationships between language and metaphors is far from simple'.⁵³ It required an historical and ultimately political perspective for its comprehension.

8.3. Gramsci: linguist

Gramsci's study of philology with Bartoli at the University of Turin from 1911 onwards had prepared him well to deal with the naivety of such presuppositions. His later experience as one of the leading figures of *L'Ordine Nuovo* during *il biennio rosso* in Turin and the irreversible trajectory into which he was drawn by the inspiration of the Russian Revolution, followed by his posthumous resurrection as one of the major Marxist theoreticians of the twentieth century, has often overshadowed the enduring importance of these years for his intellectual formation and critical disposition. Yet, as Lo Piparo and, more recently, Peter Ives and Derek Boothman have demonstrated, there is a substantial continuity of themes and concerns from these student years into Gramsci's 'maturity', beyond his notable awareness and sensitivity to the social and political importance of language.⁵⁴ Indeed, the young Gramsci seemed more likely to make a brilliant career as a university professor enjoying all the privileges accorded to such a position by Italian society than to end his days as an officially proscribed enemy of a state that sought to stop his brain from functioning.

⁵² Q 11, §28.

⁵³ Q 11, §24; *SPN*, p. 450.

⁵⁴ Cf. Lo Piparo 1979; Ives 2004a, particularly pp. 16–52; Boothman 2004, particularly pp. 28–50.

One of the great intellectual ‘regrets’ of my life is the deep wound I inflicted on my dear professor at the University of Turin, Bartoli, who was convinced I was the arch-angel sent to destroy the neo-grammarians once and for all,⁵⁵

Gramsci later tellingly recalled from his prison cell, surely not without a hint of ironic defiance. The neogrammarians had insisted that change in language proceeded according to scientific laws entirely internal to language, specifically, according to phonetic laws governing the production of sound.⁵⁶ Against this, Gramsci argued that the decisive innovation of Bartoli was that

he has transformed linguistics, conceived narrowly as a natural science, into an historical science, the roots of which must be sought ‘in time and space’ and not in the vocal apparatus in the physiological sense.⁵⁷

8.3.1. History, metaphor, hegemony

These perspectives played a decisive role in Gramsci’s critique of the linguistic presuppositions of Bukharin’s erroneous claim about metaphors, which he continually returned to interrogate in earlier notebooks.⁵⁸ Above all, it is in Notebook Eleven that Gramsci attempts to systematise these reflections and draw out their consequences for his conception of the philosophical distinctiveness of the philosophy of praxis. Against Bukharin’s dismissive use of the adjective ‘metaphorical’, Gramsci responded that

language is in fact always metaphorical. If perhaps one cannot exactly say that every discourse is metaphorical with respect to the indicated thing or sensible and material object (or to the abstract concept), in order not to extend the concept of metaphor too far, it can be said, however, that contemporary language is metaphorical with respect to the meanings and ideological content which words have had in preceding periods of civilisation.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 84.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ives 2004a, p. 20 et sqq.

⁵⁷ Q 3, §74.

⁵⁸ Cf. Q 4, §11 (C text Q 11, §27); Q 4, §17 (C text Q 11, §28); Q 7, §36; Q 8, §171; cf. Q 4, §34; Q 11, §16.

⁵⁹ Q 11, §24; SPN, p. 450; cf. Q 7, §36. Gramsci thus partially concurs with the young Nietzsche’s observation (in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*) that ‘we possess nothing but metaphors for things’, while avoiding the hyper-relativistic and arbitrary conception of language which led Nietzsche to describe ‘words’ as nothing more than ‘the image of a nerve stimulus in sounds’. For Gramsci, the proposition that words and

He continued to sketch out an historicist theory of language in which metaphors are read as both a linguistic symptom of historical transformations of the forms of intellectual and social praxis, and, crucially, as a location of class struggle and the practice of hegemony (both between classes within nations and between nations internationally).

Language changes with the transformation of the entire civilisation, through the emergence of new classes in the culture, through the hegemony exercised by one national language on others etc, and takes up precisely metaphorical words of previous civilisations and cultures [...] the new 'metaphorical' meaning is diffused with the diffusion of the new culture which in addition also creates brand-new words or borrows them from other languages with a precise meaning, that is, without the extensive meaning that they had in the original languages.⁶⁰

By regarding the use of 'old' concepts within a new *Weltauffassung* as 'metaphorical', therefore, Bukharin had in fact merely described precisely that which needed to be explained: the concrete forms in which present experience relates to the codification, diffusion and comprehension of past experience, or the ways in which a culture posits continuities within its development even and especially at moments of profound social transformation. Any contemporary language necessarily includes significant metaphorical dimensions—that is, implicit comparative mechanisms, comprehension of one (contemporary) social practice due to its (substantive or superficial) similarities with another (prior) practice—in relation both to its own past and to that of other languages with which it had or continues to have relations of subordination or domination. Expressed 'metaphorically', in terms that only became widespread after Gramsci's own theorisations, the metaphor is an index of the extent to which language is constitutively diachronic, of the extent to which a language's synchronic unity depends upon temporal differentiations and distinctions internal to it.

concepts are metaphors does not lead to the dissolution of the categories of the true and truth. Rather, it leads to their reformulation, by means of an historicist investigation of the determinant conditions and relations of force in which the true and truth are constituted.

⁶⁰ Q 11, § 24; *SPN*, pp. 451–2; cf. Q 7, § 36.

8.3.2. *Aufhebung* as inheritance: supersession and assumption

Four notes later, in the note 'Immanence and the Philosophy of Praxis',⁶¹ Gramsci poses these themes not simply in relation to language in general, but to the particular instance of the vocabulary of a new conception of the world or *Weltauffassung*. Alongside the moments of novelty by which it is commonly recognised as really new and distinct, a new conception of the world, if it is to attain the resilience, durability and diffusion among wider social layers that distinguish a genuine conception of the world with an accompanying ethics from merely 'individual' elucubrations, must also be elaborated in conceptual or philosophical terms. This process necessarily involves the inheritance of elements from previous *Weltauffassungen*; the new, that is, never appears in a pristine nakedness, but clothed in robes bequeathed by the past that it then sets about remodelling and reforming to its own ends.

Usually, when a new conception replaces the previous one, the previous language continues to be used but is, precisely, used metaphorically. The whole of language is a continuous process of metaphors, and the history of semantics is an aspect of the history of culture; language is at the same time a living thing and a museum of fossils of life and past civilisations.⁶²

Such a process had occurred, according to Gramsci, when the 'old' term of 'immanence' continued to be used in the philosophy of praxis in order to describe what was in fact a new concept, with its 'own precise meaning'. The 'old immanence' was 'presupposed as an element in the thought-process from which the new [concept] historically emerged', but 'the use [of the term] is metaphorical' because it occurred in a new culture and *Konstellation* of meaning, describing a new concept. This new concept, whose meaning remained to be specified, Gramsci argues, 'lies hidden under the metaphor'. He continues that

such a definition would in reality have been genuinely 'theory'. The philosophy of praxis continues the philosophy of immanence but purifies it of all its metaphysical apparatus and brings it onto the concrete terrain of history.

⁶¹ Q 11, §28.

⁶² Q 11, §28; *SPN*, p. 450; cf. Q 4, §17.

The use is metaphorical only in the sense that the old immanence has been superseded—that it has been superseded but is still assumed as a link in the process of thought out of which the new usage has come.⁶³

In the interregnum between notes *Q* 11, §24 and §28, Gramsci inserts several themes from prior researches that, at first glance, might seem to indicate a 'fragmentary' method of composition of even this, his most 'systematic' notebook. 'Language and Metaphors' (§24)⁶⁴ is followed by 'Reduction of the Philosophy of Praxis to a Sociology' (§25),⁶⁵ 'General Questions' (§26)⁶⁶ and 'Concept of "Orthodoxy"' (§27).⁶⁷ Perhaps the exhausting circumstances of prison routine broke his concentration, leading him to abandon the theme of the historicity of language for a few notes, before returning to this unfinished business after several detours? Closer inspection of these notes, however, reveals that Gramsci quite consciously intends to build upon certain themes related to linguistic foundations of the new concept of immanence announced in the previous entry and to place them in a broader theoretical horizon. More precisely, these notes provide the conceptual coordinates within which Gramsci articulates his historicist theory of the development of language and its implications for comprehending the novelty of the Marxian notion of immanence.

8.3.3. Nominalism versus philology

'Reduction of the Philosophy of Praxis to a Sociology' (§25) and 'General Questions' (§26) confront several themes relevant to the philosophical presuppositions of Gramsci's critique of Bukharin's arbitrary conception of language. On the one hand, Gramsci acknowledges Bukharin's refutation of

those writers who, as is mentioned in rather summary fashion in the first chapter of the 'Popular Essay', deny that one can make a sociology of the philosophy of praxis and maintain rather that this philosophy lives only in

⁶³ *Q* 11, §28; *SPN*, p. 450; cf. *Q* 4, §17; cf. also *Q* 101, §8.

⁶⁴ *SPN*, pp. 450–2; cf. the A text *Q* 7, §36, which also integrates notes on the concept of immanence from Notebook Four.

⁶⁵ *SPN*, pp. 427–30; cf. *Q* 7, §6.

⁶⁶ *SPN*, pp. 425–7; cf. *Q* 4, §13.

⁶⁷ *SPN*, pp. 462–5; cf. *Q* 4, §14, integrating notes on immanence from Notebook Four and on language from Notebook Seven.

particular historical essays (this assertion, in such a bald and crude form, is certainly erroneous and seems like a new and curious form of nominalism and philosophical scepticism).⁶⁸

Such was the position championed by Croce in his reduction of Marx's thought to no more than a useful canon for historical research. At the same time, however, Gramsci also rejects Bukharin's proffered alternative of conceiving of historical materialism as a 'sociology', for two intimately related reasons: on the one hand, Gramsci maintains that 'sociology' (according to his problematic understanding of this term) ultimately offers a speculative formulation of problems treated more concretely by the philosophy of praxis; on the other hand, he argues that such a position threatens the philosophical autonomy of the philosophy of praxis and thus, ultimately, its political autonomy and efficacy. In 'General Questions' (§26), Gramsci asks, 'What is "sociology"?"

Sociology has been an attempt to create a method of historical and political science in a form dependent on a pre-elaborated philosophical system, that of evolutionist positivism, against which sociology reacted, but only partially. It therefore became a tendency on its own; it became the philosophy of non-philosophers, an attempt to provide a schematic description and classification of historical and political facts, according to criteria built up on the model of the natural sciences. It is therefore an attempt to derive 'experimentally' the laws of evolution of human society in such a way as to 'predict' the future with the same certainty with which one predicts that the oak tree will develop out of the acorn. Vulgar evolutionism is at the root of sociology, which cannot know the dialectical principle with its passage from quantity to quality, a passage that disturbs any evolution and any law of uniformity understood in a vulgar evolutionist sense.⁶⁹

Even more harshly in relation to Michels, he argues that

The so-called laws of sociology that are assumed as laws of causation (such-and-such a fact occurs because of such-and-such a law, etc.) have no causal value: they are almost always tautologies and paralogsms. Usually they are

⁶⁸ Q 11, §25; *SPN*, p. 428.

⁶⁹ Q 11, §26.; *SPN*, p. 426.

no more than a duplicate of the observed fact itself. A fact or a series of facts is described according to a mechanical process of abstract generalisation, a relationship of similarity is derived from this and given the title of law and the law is then assumed to have causal value. [...] What is not realised is that in this way one falls into a baroque form of Platonic idealism, since these abstract laws have a strange resemblance to Plato's pure ideas that are the essence of real earthly facts.⁷⁰

This critique undoubtedly betrays a limited (and temporally bound) understanding of sociology. The unfairness of its characterisation therefore need not concern us here.⁷¹ More important is the political reason that Gramsci provides for this perspective, as a critique of both the sociology of his time and the absorption of its perspectives into the general intellectual and political culture. For Gramsci, sociology of this empiricist-positivist type forgets that statistical laws can only usefully be deployed 'so long as the great masses of the population remain essentially passive',⁷² providing a certain automatism and therefore predictability to social development which is then 'reflected' in such categories, tautologically.⁷³ Political mobilisation, however, tends precisely to 'to rouse the masses from passivity, in other words, to destroy the law of large numbers'.⁷⁴ The moment of politics, therefore, not only introduces different

⁷⁰ Q 11, §26; *SPN*, p. 430.

⁷¹ On Gramsci's relation to the social sciences of his time, cf. Filippini 2007 and Frosini 2004d. Gramsci's 'anti-sociologism' was owed, on the one hand, to his mistaken perception that positivism's dominance of the fledgling field in the early twentieth century was definitive of sociology as such and, on the other hand, to his justified concern that it exerted a negative and pacifying influence within the socialist movement. Thirdly, particularly under the influence of Bukharin's positive reception, Gramsci was concerned that sociology's claims to scientific status amounted to a reduction of the science of politics to a technical adjunct of the ideology of parliamentarianism (cf., e.g., Q 15, §10; *SPN*, pp. 243–5).

⁷² Q 11, §25; *SPN*, p. 428.

⁷³ He further notes that the use of such a perspective can sometimes even produce and strengthen such passivity: 'In the natural sciences the worst that statistics can do is produce blunders and irrelevances which can easily be corrected by further research and which in any case simply make the individual scientist who used the technique look a bit ridiculous. But in the science and art of politics it can have literally catastrophic results which do irreparable harm. Indeed in politics the assumption of the law of statistics as an essential law operating of necessity is not only a scientific error, but becomes a practical error in action. What is more it favours mental laziness and a superficiality in political programmes' (Q 11, §25; *SPN*, pp. 428–9).

⁷⁴ Q 11, §25; *SPN*, p. 428.

elements but also imposes upon pre-existing ones a new dynamic that refutes all mechanical formulas that claim to have 'all of history in their pockets'.⁷⁵

This does not mean, however, as Gramsci emphasises by reiterating his anti-nominalism, that it is simply a case of affirming, to adopt Wittgenstein's point of departure, that 'die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist'.⁷⁶ He insists that it is still possible to produce a genuine theory, rather than merely description, of the anti-determinism implicit in the dynamism of the political.

But a theory of history and politics can be made, for even if the facts are always unique and changeable in the flux of the historical movement, the concepts can be theorised; otherwise one would not even be able to tell what movement is, or the dialectic, and one would fall back into a new form of nominalism.⁷⁷

Instead, Gramsci insists that the philosophy of praxis, alongside 'a concrete analysis of the conjuncture' (Lenin), must also be able to provide an account of transition between singular historical instances, a diachronic as well as a synchronic analysis. 'The experience on which the philosophy of praxis is based', he argues,

cannot be schematised; it is history in all its infinite variety and multiplicity, whose study can give rise to 'philology' as a method of scholarship for ascertaining particular facts and to philosophy understood as a general methodology of history.⁷⁸

Gramsci thus enlarges 'the sphere of philology as it has been traditionally understood'⁷⁹ in order to include not merely the determination of a text's historical composition and transformation, but the study of the historical formation of any individual element considered in its singular irreducibility. Following Vico, he distinguishes between the study of the 'certain [*certum*]' and the study of the 'true [*verum*]' in so far as the former depends 'upon human will', or more precisely, cannot be considered apart from the human activity that

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ 'The world is everything that is the case' is the opening proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Cf. Wittgenstein 1922, pp. 30–1.

⁷⁷ Q 11, §26; SPN, p. 427.

⁷⁸ Q 11, §25; SPN, p. 248.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

constitutes it.⁸⁰ The notion of 'structure', he argues in his rejection of Croce's speculative critique, 'must be studied as something "certain" that may also be "true", but it must be studied first of all in its "certainty" in order for it to be studied as "truth"'.⁸¹ Gramsci thus proposes a dialectical resolution of the failings, on the one hand, of a strict determinism that cannot comprehend the transformative dimensions of *praxis* and, on the other hand, of a radical voluntarism that cannot discern the features of the given elements with which such *praxis* must necessarily initially set to work. 'Philology' here is understood as the 'methodological expression of the importance that the particular facts are ascertained and specified in their unmistakeable "individuality"',⁸² viewed in an historicist perspective. In this expanded sense, philology becomes a central technique of the art of politics considered as the art of intervening in the conjuncture on the basis of an analysis of the historical factors that have composed it and which it in turn composes.⁸³

The late Althusser maintained that nominalism was 'not merely the ante-chamber of materialism, but materialism itself'.⁸⁴ Gramsci, on the other hand, maintains that one should pause before endorsing all aspects of the nominalist position, lest one fall into a radical relativism that is ultimately self-defeating and performatively self-contradictory. Gramsci certainly shares the nominalist tradition's critique of universals: indeed, he consistently condemns the notion of concepts independent of the reality they seek to describe as nothing more

⁸⁰ Vico 1948, p. 63; Element X, § 138.

⁸¹ Q 101, § 8; *FSPN*, p. 347.

⁸² Q 11, § 25; *SPN*, p. 428.

⁸³ Just as Gramsci's primary objection to the 'laws of great numbers' of statistics was political in nature, so his main reason for championing 'philology' derives, unexpectedly, from his experience of the difficulties of political leadership. 'With the extension of mass parties and their organic coalescence with the intimate (economic-productive) life of the masses themselves, the process whereby popular feeling is standardised ceases to be mechanical and casual (that is, produced by the conditioning of environmental factors and the like) and becomes conscious and critical. Knowledge and a judgment of the importance of this feeling on the part of the leaders is no longer the product of hunches backed up by the identification of statistical laws, which leaders then translate into ideas and words-as-force. (This is the rational and intellectual way and is all too often fallacious). Rather it is acquired by the collective organism through "active and conscious co-participation", through "compassionality", through experience of immediate particulars, through a system that one could call "living philology". In this way a close link is formed between great mass, party and leading group; and the whole complex, thus articulated, can move together as "collective-man"' (Q 11, § 25; *SPN*, p. 429.)

⁸⁴ Althusser 1997, p. 5.

than a residue of speculative metaphysics.⁸⁵ Yet, at the same time, he is aware that one does not escape from the circle of speculation simply by positing a radical nominalism that regards words or concepts as merely arbitrary, or for which concepts exist within, and only within, the singularity of the conjuncture which they claim to comprehend and reproduce in thought.⁸⁶ Such a position, present not only in Croce's reduction of historical materialism to individual historical case studies but *also* in the arbitrary conception of language implicitly endorsed by Bukharin, is unable to explain how certain words or concepts continue to be effective, albeit in different forms and with different meanings, across different historical periods, as anything more than wilful. Furthermore, it ascribes to thought and language a merely speculative (in the original Latin sense of *speculum*, or mirror) and therefore passive relation to reality, or rather, to each singular 'reality'—which, in truth, because such thought and language are always necessarily *ours*, means *this* particular reality: the eternalisation of the present.

Gramsci poses the question in a different register. Between the Scylla of an extreme objective idealism and the Charybdis of a radical materialist nominalism, he champions an historical-materialist analysis of thought and language as social practices conducted within the struggle for hegemony of opposed class forces within determinate conjunctures. This position could be described

⁸⁵ We should note that this critique is valid not only for those philosophical tendencies, such as some variants of idealism, which posit an originary independence of ideas from their terrestrial correlates. It also applies to those systems that conjecture a possible 'achieved' independence of the realm of thought from non-thought. The 'thought-concrete' of *Reading 'Capital'*, produced by theoretical practice from the raw material of the 'real-concrete' and then subsequently subject to a theoretical order distinct from that of the real, posits precisely such a non-originary but effective independence.

⁸⁶ Such is the implication of the late Althusser's 'philosophy of the encounter', for which 'all necessity, all Meaning and all reason' arise within, and are only valid within, their particular conjuncture, or the encounter which they help to make 'take hold'. Cf. the following: 'The idea that the origin of every world, and therefore of all reality and all meaning, is due to a *swerve*, and that Swerve, not Reason or Cause, is the origin of the world, gives some sense of the audacity of Epicurus' thesis. What other philosophy has, in the history of philosophy, taken up the thesis that *Swerve was originary*, not derived? We must go further still. In order for *swerve* to give rise to an encounter from which a world is born, that encounter must last; it must be, not a "brief encounter", but a lasting encounter, which then becomes the basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason.' (Althusser 2006, p. 169.) The late Althusser thus, arguably, spontaneously rediscovers the nominalist reduction of historical materialism to a canon of historical research that lives only in individual historical studies as originally effected by Croce. For a further consequence of Althusser's ongoing self-criticism, cf. Section 9.1.1.

either as an 'expanded nominalism' or as a 'circumscribed realism'. It acknowledges, on the one hand, that some concepts are effective beyond the moment in which they first emerged, tending towards a greater or lesser degree of general validity. It thus refutes the claims of a consistent radical nominalism, for which concepts in themselves are mere reflections of a real singularity and which are always already still-born in their own moment. On the other hand, however, Gramsci's position insists that such a tendency to generality, or tendency to endure and retain validity and explanatory power beyond the moment of emergence, is circumscribed by distinct historical limits and is not to be confused with the trans- or omni-historical claims of the metaphysical tradition. Rather, it is to be explained historically and politically, as a function of different hegemonic relations within and across historical periods. The 'metaphorical' continuation of a term can only be explained philologically, by attention to the genetic development of both it and the social contexts in which has been deployed and transformed. Such an analysis not only will reveal formal similarities and substantive differences in the use of any particular term in any given period. More importantly, it also will be able to demonstrate the social and political forces that are the reasons for such continuities and novelties.

8.3.4 'A completely autonomous and independent structure of thought'

Finally, in the 'Concept of "Orthodoxy"',⁸⁷ Gramsci redeploys one of his most fundamental philosophical perspectives: the autonomy of the philosophy of praxis. Unlike Bukharin (and many others), he does not assert this to be an *immediate* autonomy, as if Marx had sprung forth fully-grown from his own head. Rather, for Gramsci, the autonomy of the philosophy of praxis is *mediated* or produced by its capacity to absorb, explain in rational terms and critically re-articulate previous forms of thought. Gramsci rejects the reduction of the philosophy of praxis to other forms of thought (either materialist or idealist), its supplementation by an eclectic or 'opportunist' borrowing of particular elements from other philosophies (as Gramsci argues is implicit in Otto Bauer's plea for the agnosticism of Communist parties), or the mere dismissal of past

⁸⁷ Q 11, §27; SPN, pp. 462–5.

and contemporary philosophical systems as ‘untruth’ (Bukharin is not the only or even major offender in this respect). His reasons for doing so are not only ‘theoretical’. Rather, his proposal is fundamentally founded upon a political perspective: turning to such ‘heterogeneous supports’ in fact reveals a political weakness, a lack of conviction in the ‘fundamental concept that the philosophy of praxis is “sufficient unto itself”’, that it

contains in itself all the fundamental elements needed to construct a total and integral conception of the world, a total philosophy and theory of natural science, and not only that but everything that is needed to give life to an integral practical organisation of society, that is, to become a total integral civilisation. [...] To maintain that the philosophy of praxis is not a completely autonomous and independent structure of thought in antagonism to all traditional philosophies and religions, means in reality that one has not severed one’s links with the old world, if indeed one has not actually capitulated.⁸⁸

For Gramsci, as for Bukharin and the later division into ‘proletarian’ and ‘bourgeois’ science, ‘a theory is “revolutionary” precisely to the extent that it is an element of conscious separation and distinction into two camps’.⁸⁹ Such would seem to be implicit in Bukharin’s defence of Marxist orthodoxy and rhetorical dismissal of other philosophies. Gramsci immediately adds, however, that in order to be truly autonomous, a philosophy must also be a ‘peak inaccessible to the enemy camp’.⁹⁰ It was precisely this dimension to which Bukharin (and the Second International, and Diamat [...]) could not attain. Not only does the philosophy of praxis, according to Gramsci, possess the capacity to sublate [*aufheben*] other forms of thought. Due to its historicism, it is also able to explain critically other philosophies, to rewrite their narratives in its own more realistic terms, thereby achieving a theoretical mastery of its opponents, historical and contemporary. In its turn, this theoretical achievement has a directly political significance, insofar as it serves to reinforce the philosophy of praxis as an ‘autonomous and independent structure of thought in antagonism’ to other forms of thought. Thus Gramsci can argue that

⁸⁸ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 462.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

at the level of theory the philosophy of praxis cannot be confounded with or reduced to any other philosophy. Its originality lies not only in its transcending of previous philosophies but also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself.⁹¹

It is precisely along this line, as we shall see, that Gramsci situates Marx's new concept of immanence, as a paradigmatic case study of the inheritance of prior elements within an entirely new way of conceiving philosophy itself.

8.3.5. The subterranean current of philosophies of immanence

Notebook Eleven's regroupment of themes developed at different times in earlier phases of research, therefore, presents in a more conceptually satisfactory and consequential form general presuppositions that are decisive for grasping the significance of Gramsci's specific proposal of Marx's new concept of immanence and its status as a touchstone for the historical novelty of the philosophy of praxis. It is only after having outlined these that Gramsci returns his attention to Bukharin's position regarding the term 'immanence' in Marx's thought.⁹² With immanence now resituated as the final link in a chain of argumentation, Gramsci redeploys in synthetic form a critique that, in its turn, had similarly been developed in earlier notes. In Notebook Four in May–August 1930, Gramsci had argued that

in reality, Marx gives his own meaning to the term 'immanence', that is, he is not a 'pantheist' in the traditional metaphysical sense, but a 'Marxist' or an 'historical materialist'.⁹³

Revisiting the theme a few notes later, he had qualified this thesis, admitting the possibility of inheritance of certain elements from previous philosophies of immanence and specifying the means by which Marx's new concept was forged. He argues that

⁹¹ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

⁹² Q 11 §28.

⁹³ Q 4, §11.

Marx continues the philosophy of immanence, but he purifies it of all of its metaphysical apparatus and leads it onto the concrete terrain of history. The use is metaphorical only in the sense that the conception was sublated, developed etc.⁹⁴

The introduction of the thesis of a specific conceptual continuity (beyond the ‘metaphorical’ appropriation of a word) then set Gramsci on a search for what could be described, echoing the late Althusser, as a ‘subterranean current’ of the tradition of immanence in modern philosophy. He argued that ‘traces’ of the new immanence might be found in the work of Giordano Bruno, absorbed by Marx either directly from his reading of the Nolan or due to their presence in ‘classical German philosophy’ (here, Gramsci’s reference is almost certainly to Hegel’s ‘attempt to go beyond the traditional conceptions of “idealism” and “materialism” in a new synthesis’,⁹⁵ founded precisely upon a conception of immanence in the dialectical relation between being and thought).

And besides, is Marx’s immanence something completely new? Or are there traces of it in previous philosophy? In Giordano Bruno, for example, I believe that there can be found traces of such a conception. Did Marx know Bruno? Or did these elements pass from Bruno into classical German philosophy? All problems to be studied concretely.⁹⁶

Soon after, in November–December 1930, Gramsci appears to affiliate Machiavelli to this lineage, insofar as he had posed ‘an original conception of the world’ (‘which could also be called a “philosophy of praxis” or “neo-

⁹⁴ Q 4, §17.

⁹⁵ Q 4, §11.

⁹⁶ Q 4, §17. Significantly, in July–August 1932, Gramsci concludes Q 11, §28 ‘Immanence and the Philosophy of Praxis’ with a redrafted version of this note, though his tentative suggestion has by now solidified into a conviction. ‘It seems that in Giordano Bruno, for example, there are many traces of such a new conception; the founders of the philosophy of praxis knew Bruno. They knew his writings and traces of Bruno’s works annotated by them still survive’ (Q 11, 28; *SPN*, p. 450). Gerratana noted in the critical apparatus to the 1975 critical edition of the *Quaderni del carcere* that ‘It is not clear from which source Gramsci had such confirmation, or the notice of the existence of works of Bruno with Marx’s marginal notes. Both affirmations, however, are not confirmed by the current state of Marx scholarship’ (Q, p. 2899). Over thirty years later, the ongoing work of *MEGA* has still not provided such evidence.

humanism''') that refused transcendental or immanentist (in the metaphysical sense) elements and posited history as the 'concrete terrain' upon which men act and transform reality.⁹⁷

Now, however, in Notebook Eleven in 1932, he argues that the philosophy of praxis not only continues previous philosophies of immanence, purifying the concept of its metaphysical apparatus and leading it onto the 'concrete terrain of history'. Rather, he adds that

in reality the term immanence has here acquired a special meaning which is not that of the 'pantheists' nor any other metaphysical meaning but one which is new and needs to be specified [...] It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.⁹⁸

'Metaphorical' appropriation gives way to substantive transformation. Against Bukharin's assertion of an arbitrary connection with prior philosophies of immanence, Gramsci has now identified an organic one: the concept of immanence implicit in Marx's work resolves the *aporiai* of the prior immanentist tradition, providing at the same time its completion and superannuation because it can explain the determinations of the prior concept. The determinations of the new concept, however, still remain to be specified.

8.4. Why immanence?

Why was Gramsci so interested in mid-1930, as fascism and Stalinism deepened their domination, to demonstrate that the concept of immanence was a fundamental category—if not *the* fundamental category, over and above that of 'materialism'—of the *Weltanschauung* that had grown from the materialist conception of history? Particularly given that, as we have seen, it was not Bukharin but rather Gramsci himself who signalled this category as deserving such explicit attention? Recently, the concept of immanence has become one of the central themes of (in particular, political) philosophy. If, once upon a time, one felt obliged loudly to declare one's 'materialist' credentials in radical intellectual circles, today something similar could be said regarding the

⁹⁷ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, pp. 248–9. Cf. Section 9.4.2.

⁹⁸ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 465.

affirmation of 'immanentist' tendencies: we are all anti-transcendent(al)ists now. The recent renaissance of Spinoza studies has contributed strongly to this tendency: the works of Yovel, Deleuze and Negri, all in their own way, place a strong emphasis upon different understandings of the concept of immanence.⁹⁹ The 'plane of immanence' is a central term in Deleuze's thought, perhaps the central problem of his work in all its phases. Above all, however, it has been the popularisation and deployment of this term in Hardt's and Negri's *Empire*, combined with that work's Foucauldian-inspired biopolitical turn, that has strongly marked recent debates in political theory.

According to Hardt and Negri, 'the primary event of modernity' is 'the affirmation of the powers of *this* world, the discovery of the plane of immanence':¹⁰⁰ 'the powers of creation that had previously been consigned exclusively to the heavens' were 'brought down to earth'¹⁰¹ by the radical dimensions of 'Renaissance humanism's secularizing project'.¹⁰² This tendency was later consolidated by Spinoza's equation of the 'horizon of immanence and the horizon of democratic political order' or the 'absoluteness of democracy'.¹⁰³ The 'counter-revolutionary project to resolve the crisis of modernity [that] unfolded in the centuries of the Enlightenment'¹⁰⁴ successfully restored a transcendental order anchored in the figures of the modern state and (European) sovereignty,¹⁰⁵ but such transcendence progressively came into conflict with an 'immanence of capital'.¹⁰⁶ In postmodernity, the epoch of the real subsumption of labour to capital and the 'society of control',¹⁰⁷ the plane of immanence once more opens up in the semi-mythical figure of 'Empire',¹⁰⁸ as the *Diesseitigkeit* upon

⁹⁹ Cf. Yovel 1989a and 1989b; Deleuze 1990; Negri 1981. The literature discussing these interpretations of Spinoza is by now extensive. Rarely however, do these discussions engage with the prior history of the concept of immanence in modern philosophy in order to problematise more recent formulations. An important exception is represented by Kerslake 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 71.

¹⁰¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 73.

¹⁰² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 91.

¹⁰³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 73.

¹⁰⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 78.

¹⁰⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 164.

¹⁰⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 327.

¹⁰⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 329.

¹⁰⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 373.

which the Multitude must chart its course beyond the crisis of modernity. 'The field of immanence' thus becomes 'the exclusive terrain of the theory and practice of politics'.¹⁰⁹

The concept of immanence does not appear to have played, however, a prominent role in the early Marxist tradition in which Gramsci's thought was formed. As previously noted, themes of immanence had been important for the elaboration of post-Kantian classical German philosophy, the thought of Hegel in particular. Despite his respect for the 'rational kernel' of Hegel's thought, the concept of Hegelian immanence was not one of the elements that Marx explicitly took over and developed in his own work. When he uses the term, in phrases such as 'the opposition of use value and value immanent to the commodity' or the 'immanent contradiction' of the use of machinery for the production of surplus-value, he would seem to be using merely a 'commonsensical' (or perhaps even 'metaphorical') understanding of 'immanent' as 'internal to a given system or process'. Beyond a generic equation with secularism or anti-transcendent perspectives (often linked to Spinozist enthusiasms), 'immanence' as a distinct category was not current in the Second International. Lenin does not deal with the category in either *Materialism and*

¹⁰⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 377. *Empire* represents the most 'populist' presentation of themes of immanence that have occupied Negri throughout his work. Perhaps the most important examples are contained in his works on Descartes (2007), Spinoza (1991) and on the concept of 'constituent power [*il potere costituente*]', translated into English as *Insurgencies* (1999). Despite the popularity of rhetorics of immanence in the post-*Empire* theoretical conjuncture, it is arguable whether that book did in fact introduce genuinely new elements into the philosophical discussion of the concept. Two 'family resemblances' could be noted in this regard: on the one hand, as in Althusser's understanding of Gramsci, immanence in Negri refers to a generic 'downhereness', or an anti-transcendent/theological/metaphysical form of thought, thus following the 'popularised Spinozism' that has strongly marked the reception of the concept in 'everyday consciousness'; on the other hand, Negri's notion of immanence bears decisive similarities to the supposedly laical if not secular concept proposed by Croce, particularly in terms of the 'simultaneous immanence/transcendence' (exodus of the multitude) posited as the 'rose in the cross' immanent to the present ('*Empire*' as this-worldliness of capital beyond the transcendental sovereignty of modernity) presented in *Empire* and *Multitudes*. Despite Negri's rejection (and that of the Italian workerist tradition in general) of the residues of Crocean historicism (present also in the postwar PCI's reading of Gramsci, leading to the workerist tradition's almost complete neglect of the Gramscian legacy), it is possible that more than merely a 'residue' of such a philosophy of history (and thus also of a certain type of transcendence) remains in his work, as some perceptive critics have recently begun to suggest. Cf. Tomba 2007a and 2007b.

Empirio-Criticism or his *Philosophical Notebooks*, except negatively and briefly, in relation to a particular neo-Kantian interpretation, in the former work.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, as Frosini notes,

the two great syntheses of philosophical Marxism of the 1920s, Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, both of which were published in 1923, do not refer to the problem of immanence.¹¹¹

Instead, each in its own way, those works posit the category of *totality* as decisive for the interpretation of historical materialism. How could Bukharin's non-dismissal of this concept as a merely metaphorical residue from a super-annuated history of philosophy have threatened the theoretical coherence of the philosophy of praxis and therefore the practice of proletarian hegemony itself, as Gramsci seems to have held? What was to be gained from mounting such a forthright defence of a concept previously marginal to the Marxist tradition?

As so often in the development of the research project of the *Prison Notebooks*, an offensive position on one front was consolidated due to a defensive manoeuvre on another. Gramsci here deployed the 'revolutionary philosophical strategy' of inhabiting his antagonists' positions to such an extent that he was able to turn secret allies' canons against each other.¹¹² For the concept of immanence had been keenly contested by the different tendencies in the Italian reception of Hegel. Labriola's attempt to win the concept for a 'philosophy of praxis' that set out from Marx's critique of Hegel did not gain an audience among Marxists (save, of course, for Gramsci, who does not, curiously, explicitly refer to Labriola's contributions in his discussion of Marx's new concept of immanence).¹¹³ Instead, it was the 'post-Marxist' liberalism of Croce and the

¹¹⁰ Cf. in particular section three of the fourth chapter 'The Immanentists as Comrades-In-Arms of Mach and Avenarius' (Lenin 1964, Volume 14, p. 245 et sqq.).

¹¹¹ Frosini 2004a.

¹¹² This was Althusser's description of Spinoza's strategy in the *Ethics* of beginning with God, despite being (so Althusser believed, 'after the entire tradition of his worst enemies') an atheist. 'A supreme strategy: he began by taking over the chief stronghold of his adversary, or rather he established himself there as if he were his own adversary, therefore not suspected of being the sworn adversary, and redispensed the theoretical fortress in such a way as to turn it completely around, as one turns around cannons against the fortress's own occupant...' (Althusser 1997, pp. 10–11.)

¹¹³ As we have seen, Gramsci regards Labriola as 'the only one who has sought to give historical materialism a scientific foundation' (Q 3, § 31). Labriola regarded Marx's philosophy as a philosophy that '*is immanent to the things on which it philosophises*',

Fascist 'actualism' of Gentile that emerged as the key proponents of immanence; in Croce's far more influential case, on both the metaphysical and historiographical terrains. It was undoubtedly this tradition that Gramsci had in mind when he set about his critique of Bukharin.

8.4.1. 'Absolute immanence'

'Absolute immanence', alongside 'absolute historicism' and a 'religion of liberty', had been one of the slogans under which Croce had sought to settle accounts with his erstwhile Marxist conscience after 1900. As previously noted, Croce accused Marx's thought of being a fundamentally metaphysical construction in which the reality of the economy subordinated the essentially ephemeral and phenomenal superstructures. Croce's thought, in opposition, was an 'absolute immanence' because it conferred full reality on all elements, now related in an articulated constellation of distinctions rather than of causal (hierarchical) relations. Thought is 'immanent' to being for Croce, in a very particular sense. In a first move, he insisted that the concept is 'expressive', or 'knowing work, and as such, expressed or spoken';¹¹⁴ it therefore exists only in a realised 'terrestrial' form, not as a vague 'intimation of immortality'. In a second moment, however, he insisted that such a concrete concept, in order to be a concept and not a mere representation, must necessarily partake of 'universality, or transcendence with respect to single representations, where no one representation or no number of these representations is ever able to be adequate to the concept'.¹¹⁵ He then insisted that such transcendence of

that is, a theory that does not set itself above that which it theorises (transcendence of thought to being) but which acknowledges its 'earthly' character. A dogmatic division between thought and being, subject and object, is dissolved by Labriola into a dialectical concept of *praxis*. For Labriola, historical materialism, insofar as its emergence was historically determined by the development of capitalist society itself with the formation of the partiality of the modern proletariat, 'is no longer subjective critique applied to things, but is the [...] self-critique of the things themselves. The true critique of society is society itself' (Labriola 1965, p. 105). Given Gramsci's similar definition of theory as itself a form of *praxis*, that fact that he does not explicitly refer to Labriola while discussing Marx's concept of immanence is even more surprising. Frosini has reconstructed the centrality of immanence in Labriola's thought and its relevance to Gramsci's position. Cf. Frosini 2004a.

¹¹⁴ Croce 1967, p. 26.

¹¹⁵ Croce 1967, pp. 26–7.

individual cases was only possible, not because the concept found a truth before, above and beyond its expressive embodiment, but because the concept is 'concrete'.

The concept is universal and transcendent with respect to single representations, taken in its abstract singularity; on the other hand, it is immanent in all representations and thus also in the single [representation]. The concept is universal with respect to representations and is not exhausted in any one of them; however, because the world of knowledge is a world of representations, the concept, if it were not in the representations themselves, would not be anywhere: it would be in another world, which cannot be thought and therefore which is not. Its [the concept's] transcendence, therefore, is at the same time immanence.¹¹⁶

Here, Gramsci found the same contradiction at work as that which he argued was present in the supposed immanence of Croce's historiography. Croce proposed the notion of a liberal 'religion of freedom' which determined modernity, despite all evidence (such as Fascist reaction) to the contrary: a speculative 'ably disguised form of history according to a plan [*storia a disegno*]'.¹¹⁷ The religion of freedom was immanent to modern history and the concept immanent to representations because, in truth, they were already present in them, as their originary ground and finally revealed truth: a classic idealist proposition in which thought is 'immanent' to—dwelling or remaining within, in the sense of the original Latin composite—being. For Gramsci, this notion of immanence remained trapped within the problematic of 'speculation' determining the pre-Marxian concept of immanence in which thought could reflect reality because it was in truth reflecting itself.¹¹⁸

Croce's attempt to purify Hegel's thought of 'every trace and residue of transcendence and of theology and therefore of metaphysics',¹¹⁹ whatever his attempts to produce an absolutely immanent philosophy affirming the secular course of history, nevertheless remained

¹¹⁶ Croce 1967, pp. 27–8.

¹¹⁷ Q 10II, §41xvi; *FSPN*, p. 376.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Section 7.2.8.

¹¹⁹ Q 10I, §8; cf. Q 8, §224.

a 'speculative' philosophy, its essence containing not merely a trace of transcendence and theology but transcendence and theology in their entirety, with the crudest, mythological outer skin only just sloughed off.¹²⁰

Gramsci regarded Croce's critique of Marxism's 'metaphysical' concept of structure as precisely one of the most revealing indices of the extent to which it was in fact his own thought that remained entrapped in a speculative and therefore metaphysical problematic. For Croce could not comprehend that Marx's proposal to study the 'historicity' of a given social formation on the basis of its determining and formative moments was precisely the refusal of any transcendent perspective from which human history and actions could be judged. The 'concept' for Croce, his claims notwithstanding, was a moment of transcendence by means of which the knowing subjects could extricate themselves from reality and elevate themselves to the Olympian heights of an eternal thought, conceived in the terms of what called be called a 'meta-subject'. The philosophy of praxis, on the other hand, according to Gramsci, turns such an ultimately 'subjective conception of reality' upside down,

explaining it as a historical fact, as the 'historical subjectivity of a social group', as a real fact which presents itself as a phenomenon of philosophical 'speculation' while it is simply a practical act, the form assumed by a concrete social content and the way that the whole of society is led to fashion a moral unity for itself.¹²¹

The philosophy of praxis's concept of 'immanence' is thus radically different from the Crocean version; for, whereas the latter results in the speculative consecration of a determinate present in the eternity of the 'concept', the former can explain such an hypostatisation as a determinate practice by a social group seeking to ensure its own real (and not merely conceptual) 'transcendence'. In Croce's terminology, it does so precisely by refusing any qualitative distinction between 'representation' and 'concept', insisting that their real difference is to be explained politically, as a function of hegemonic relations of force.

¹²⁰ Q 101, §8; *FSPN*, p. 347.

¹²¹ Q 101, §8; *FSPN*, pp. 347–8.

8.4.2. The ‘transcendence’ of philosophies of immanence

Gramsci further highlighted the fundamentally *political* motivations for his critique when he reflected upon ‘one of the greatest weaknesses of the philosophies of immanence’ prior to Marx.¹²² In his Olympian reserve, Croce bore a decisive resemblance to philosophies of immanence of the Renaissance,¹²³ reproducing their chief defect, namely,

that they have not understood how to build an ideological unity between the lower and higher orders, between the ‘simple people’ and the intellectuals.¹²⁴

This weakness was particularly noticeable in the failure of previous philosophies of immanence (and in Croce’s own political and paedagogical activity) to articulate an alternative paedagogical programme that could replace the formative role of religious instruction in the education of children.¹²⁵ They had been incapable of an organic and integral fusion with the lower orders in all the dimensions of social life.¹²⁶ These ‘traditional intellectuals’ could be ‘immanent’ to the life of the people only by means of the institutions of a transcendent state, which claimed to organise society from within, but only on condition of being above it. They could not progress to that integration within the life of the people that Gramsci signalled as the passage from ‘knowing [*sapere*] to understanding [*comprendere*] to feeling [*sentire*]’ and, crucially, ‘vice versa, from feeling to understanding to knowing’.¹²⁷ It was precisely this transition, from both sides of the equation, which the philosophy of praxis’s ‘dialectical-paedagogic’

¹²² Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 329.

¹²³ Q 101, § 6.

¹²⁴ Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 329.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Gramsci, for whom the Reformation was ultimately of much greater world-historical significance than the Renaissance, thus offers a very different evaluation of the significance of Renaissance humanism from Negri. According to Gramsci, the humanist project, whatever its real strengths and undeniable intellectual sophistication, was compromised from the outset by a distance between word and deed; it could bring philosophical concepts down to earth only by itself remaining above it. To adopt Negri’s terminology, this tradition could be recaptured by the transcendental apparatuses deployed during the Enlightenment because it had not in fact, as a social movement, broken politically and socially with such transcendental *dispositifs*. In this sense, despite Negri’s claim that Hegel instituted a ‘bad’ immanence, Hegel could be regarded as the most faithful inheritor of the Renaissance, consecrating or confirming the humanists’ practical disposition speculatively, in the figure of the state.

¹²⁷ Q 11, § 67; *SPN*, p. 418.

relation to *senso comune*, *Aufhebung* of the speculative notion of immanence and its related redefinition of the notion of theory aimed to produce. Thus, as with the emergence of the concept of 'absolute historicism' (with which it has an integral connection throughout the research project of the *Prison Notebooks*, particularly in Q 8, § 204 of February–March 1932, the first appearance of the term 'absolute historicism'), Gramsci's attempt to specify the philosophy of praxis's new notion of immanence underwent a sharpening of focus when it passed through the medium of his critique of Croce.

8.5. Gramsci: economist

Even more importantly, the early months of 1932 witnessed the integration of another perspective into Gramsci's search for possible theoretical precursors for the new Marxist concept of immanence: the critique of political economy. Gramsci's strident critique of 'economism' has often mistakenly been equated with a politician's impatience with (political-) economic question, or taken as confirmation of the notion that, in the words of Anderson, 'Gramsci's silence on economic problems was complete'.¹²⁸ As both Boothman and Krätke have more recently argued, however, nothing could be further from the truth.¹²⁹ At the beginning of his incarceration, Gramsci clearly regarded study of economic themes as an intellectual, political and personal priority. In a letter on 9 December 1926, he made his intentions clear:

1. to stay well in order to be always in good health; 2. to study German and Russian systematically and regularly; 3. to study economics and history.¹³⁰

One of Gramsci's first intellectual engagements in the *Prison Notebooks*'s project, of course, was the translation of the 1859 'Preface' to the *Contribution towards the Critique of Political Economy*. As we have seen, Gramsci incessantly returns to the themes of this text throughout the years, testing its hypotheses from different perspectives, meditating on its theoretical consequences and

¹²⁸ Anderson 1976a, p. 75; cf. Haug 2006, p. 67. Ruccio 2006 repeats the claim that the *Prison Notebooks* give limited treatment to the critique of political economy.

¹²⁹ Boothman 1995; Krätke 1998; cf. also Badaloni 1994.

¹³⁰ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 41.

applying the principles he believed to have found in it to concrete historical case studies (most notably with the concept of passive revolution). Furthermore, the most cursory inspection of the *Prison Notebooks* reveals a mass of material directly and indirectly concerned with economic questions. The well-known Notebook Twenty-Two on 'Americanism and Fordism' of early 1934 is only the tip of an iceberg of researches clearly indicated in recurring titles of a series of notes: 'Points to Reflect on for a Study of Economics',¹³¹ 'Brief Notes on Economics',¹³² and a series of other specialised notes (e.g. 'Machiavelli as an Economist',¹³³ and earlier notes on *Graziadei* from late 1930–1).¹³⁴ As Krätke notes,

There are numerous notes and considerations in the notebooks on (political) economy, on the critique of the economic way of thinking and on the renewal of 'critical' i.e. Marxist economics. They give witness of an advanced study of the available economic literature and of a serious engagement with the history and logic of economic science [...]. In these notes Gramsci deals with the economic history of Italy and other countries, studies the course of the international economic crisis, the development of state financing in Italy and in other countries. He engages with the recent development of economic theory, reflects on the foundations of an independent science of economics, comments on critiques of Marx's economic theory [...], immerses himself in the philosophical significance of discoveries of the classical economists.¹³⁵

It is no exaggeration to claim that of all the figures of so-called 'Western Marxism' (with the possible exception of Adorno), Gramsci demonstrates the most thorough-going engagement with and knowledge of supposedly 'classical-Marxist' themes derived from the critique of political economy. Given the foundational status Anderson ascribed to the incarcerated Sardinian for

¹³¹ Q 10II, §25; *FSPN*, pp. 164–5; Q 10II, §37i; *FSPN*, pp. 176–9; Q 10II, §27; *FSPN*, pp. 167–8; Q 10II, §23; *FSPN*, pp. 168–70; Q 10II, §30; *FSPN*, pp. 170–1; Q 10II, §32; *FSPN*, pp. 171–3; all from mid-1932.

¹³² Q 10II, §15; *FSPN*, pp. 166–7; Q 15, §43; *FSPN*, pp. 174–5; Q 15, §45; *FSPN*, p. 176.

¹³³ Q 8, §162; *FSPN*, pp. 163–4.

¹³⁴ Q 7, §23; *FSPN*, pp. 185–6; Q 7, §27; *FSPN*, p. 186; Q 8, §166; *FSPN*, pp. 186–7; Q 7, §30; *FSPN*, pp. 187–9.

¹³⁵ Krätke 1998, p. 54.

Western Marxism as a whole—embodying in his own life the transition from political militant to scholar that Anderson regarded as the defining characteristic of Marxist theory in the West in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods—knowledge of the complexity of Gramsci's economic thinking should be enough to prompt reconsiderations of *Considerations on Western Marxism's* influential thesis of the increasingly 'philosophical', rather than 'economic-political' focus, of the 'post-classical' development of Marxism. In short: Gramsci's lack of concern for economic problems is as much of a myth as the binary opposition that seeks to define philosophical themes as inadequate for the elaboration of the critique of political economy and Marxist political practice.

8.5.1. 'Speculative immanence and historical and realistic immanence'

The context in which Gramsci compiles many of his economic notes and, in particular, attempts to integrate the critique of political economy into the search for possible theoretical precursors for the new Marxist concept of immanence, provides further evidence of the integral relationship between philosophical and political-economic concerns. For the notebook in which many of Gramsci's notes on the history of economics, the philosophical presuppositions of political economy and Marxist political economy in particular, are formulated is the 'philosophically-orientated' Notebook Ten (1932)—alongside Notebook Eleven (similarly, 1932), undoubtedly Gramsci's most sustained and systematic philosophical intervention. Even more significantly, many of Gramsci's economic notes were designed to refute elements of Croce's multi-faceted critique of Marx, which included not merely philosophical objections but also critiques of strictly economic arguments. The philosopher Croce, despite declaring Marx's thought to be a 'non-philosophy', nevertheless still felt the need to enter the battle raging at the time regarding the scientific validity of Marx's theses, those regarding the theory of value and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall in particular. In the midst of his critique of Croce's philosophical system, and at the same time as his most intensive engagement with economic studies in the second half of May 1932, Gramsci combines these two streams of research in the note 'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy. Speculative Immanence and Historical and Realistic Immanence'. He formulates the following surprising equation:

In a certain sense it seems to me possible to say that the philosophy of praxis
= Hegel + David Ricardo.¹³⁶

At first glance, Gramsci would seem to be referring to the contribution of the Ricardian theory of value to the formation of Marx's thought, summarised more generally in the Marxist vulgate under the heading of 'English political economy' alongside 'French politics' and 'classical German philosophy' as three constitutive 'sources' of the new *Weltanschauung*. However, as Gramsci proceeds to specify the motivations for his proposed equation, it becomes clear that he has something slightly different in mind than the 'classical' tripartite division:

The problem is to be presented initially in the following way: are the new methodological canons introduced by Ricardo into economic science to be considered as merely instrumental values (by understanding them as a new chapter of formal logic) or have they had a significance of philosophical innovation? Was not the discovery of the formal logical principle of the 'law of tendency', which leads to the scientific definition of fundamental concepts in economics of 'homo oeconomicus' and of 'determinate market', a discovery of gnoseological value as well? Does it not imply precisely a new 'immanence', a new conception of 'necessity' and of freedom, etc.? It seems to me that philosophy of praxis made precisely this translation, which has universalised Ricardo's discoveries, extending them in an adequate fashion to the whole of history and thus drawing from them, in an original form, a new conception of the world. A whole series of questions will have to be studied...¹³⁷

On 30 May 1932 (thus, in the same period as he wrote this note, or perhaps shortly afterwards), Gramsci wrote to Tania (requesting that his thoughts be communicated to Sraffa) regarding his intuition. Given Sraffa's unfailing friendship and generosity, and given that Sraffa was then working on Ricardo's *Collected Works* in Cambridge, Gramsci could not have had a more qualified interlocutor.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Q 10II, §9; *SPN*, p. 400. Althusser glossed this as 'Marxist philosophy is Ricardo generalized' (Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 85).

¹³⁷ Q 10II, §9; *SPN*, p. 401; cf. Q 11, §52; *SPN*, pp. 410–14.

¹³⁸ Recent works have emphasised the importance, both personal and political, of Sraffa's friendship for Gramsci (cf. Fausti 1998; Davis 2002; Sen 2003; Rossi and Vacca

I want to report to you a series of observations so that, if appropriate, you write about them to Piero asking him for some bibliographical suggestions that will allow me to broaden the field of my meditations and to orient myself better. I would like to know whether there exist some specialized publications, even in English, dealing with Ricardo's research method in economic science and with the innovations that Ricardo has introduced into methodological criticism. [...] The course of my reflections is this: can one say that Ricardo has been of significance in the history of philosophy and not only in the history of economic science, in which he certainly is of the first order? And can one also say that Ricardo contributed to directing the first theoreticians of the philosophy of praxis towards surmounting Hegelian philosophy and to the construction of their new historicism, purged of all traces of speculative logic? It seems to me that one might try to prove this assumption and that it would be worth doing. I start out from two concepts, fundamental to economic science, of a 'determinate market' and 'the law of tendency', which, it seems to me, we owe to Ricardo and I reason as follows: isn't it perhaps from these two concepts that a motive was given for reducing the 'immanentistic' conception of history—expressed in idealistic and speculative language by German classical philosophy—to an immediately historical and realistic 'immanence' in which the law of causality of natural sciences has been purged of its mechanistic aspect and has become synthetically identified with the dialectical reasoning of Hegelianism? Perhaps this whole sequence of thoughts still appears rather turbid, but I'm interested in it being understood as a whole, even though approximately, to the extent necessary to know whether the problem has been glimpsed and studied by some Ricardo scholar. [...] That English classical economics did contribute to the development of the new philosophy is commonly admitted, but one usually thinks of Ricardo's theory of value. It seems to me that one ought to look further and identify a contribution

2007). Sraffa followed Gramsci's intellectual project with intense interest, posing judicious questions to him at decisive moments. Anderson argued that Gramsci's and Sraffa's friendship was a 'combination of personal intimacy and intellectual separation. There appears to have been no remote connection between the universes of their respective works' (Anderson 1976b, p. 75). As Gerratana notes, 'in its summary nature, this judgement is unacceptable, and can be easily refuted with simple facts' (Gerratana 1991, p. xiii). Any temporary breakdown of communication, as we will soon see, was an external matter imposed by distance and carceral censorship.

that I would call synthetic—that is, a contribution that concerns intuition of the world and the mode of thinking—and not only analytical, regarding a particular doctrine, fundamental though it may be.¹³⁹

Sraffa initially greeted Gramsci's questions and suggestions with sympathetic enthusiasm. 'Nino can imagine how much his observations have interested me', he wrote in a letter to Tania on 21 June 1932, which she in turn transcribed in her letter to Gramsci on 5 July.¹⁴⁰ In particular, Sraffa seems to have been struck by the novel way in which Gramsci attempted to articulate the thought of Ricardo with that of Marx and Engels, though he felt himself unqualified to comment extensively due to his lack of knowledge of the latter.

I need to think about the principal observation regarding the significance of Ricardo in the history of philosophy—and in order to understand it well, I need to study, more than the writings of Ricardo, those of the first theoreticians of the philosophy of praxis.¹⁴¹

However, regarding the substantive content of Gramsci's suggestions, involving as it did material much closer to his own research and competence, he began to express some doubt:

I would however like some explanation of the two concepts of 'determinate market' and 'law of tendency' that Nino calls fundamental and that he, placing them in quotation marks, seems to attribute a technical significance: I confess that I don't understand well what they refer to, and as far as regards the second, I have been accustomed, rather, to consider it as one of the characteristics of vulgar economy.¹⁴²

Turning his attention finally to Ricardo himself, Sraffa's sceptical response would seem to indicate that Gramsci's tentative suggestions, however stimulating, were ultimately a flight of fancy lacking in any substantive historical foundations.¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 178–9.

¹⁴⁰ This is one of the longest letters contained in Sraffa's letters to Gramsci. Significantly, it begins with a long discussion of Croce before turning attention to Gramsci's proposal concerning Ricardo. Tania, however, sensing the importance of the theme, inverted the order of the theme in her transcription. Cf. Sraffa 1991.

¹⁴¹ Sraffa 1991, p. 74.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Cf. Boothman 1991, pp. 61–4.

At any rate, it is very difficult to evaluate the philosophical importance, if there is any, of Ricardo, because he himself, differently from the philosophers of praxis, didn't ever consider his own thought historically. In general, he never adopts the historical point of view and, as said, considers the laws of society in which he lives to be natural and unchangeable laws. Ricardo was, and always remained, a stockbroker of mediocre education [...] from his writings it is clear, it seems to me, that the only cultural element that you can find there is derived from the natural sciences.¹⁴⁴

Gramsci never responded to Sraffa's request for clarification; indeed, there is some doubt that he ever even had the opportunity to read the letter. For precisely in the period in which Sraffa's letter arrived (via Tania's transcription), there was an increase in carceral surveillance. On 12 July 1932, after long impassioned exchanges on Croce in the immediately preceding period, Gramsci felt compelled to instruct Tania not to speak of anything other than 'family matters'.¹⁴⁵

8.5.2. 'Determinate market'

Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct the import of Gramsci's suggestion from other notes and letters written in the same period. It is ironic that Sraffa felt he did not understand (even if he was simply being polite or keeping in mind the sensibilities of his isolated friend) Gramsci's proposal ('in quotation marks') of the philosophical importance of Ricardo's concepts of 'determinate market' and 'law of tendency'—and not only because Sraffa was then working on Ricardo's texts and was seemingly well placed to 'intuit' Gramsci's meaning. For Gramsci would seem to have derived his notion of the philosophical significance of Ricardo for the philosophy of praxis not from

¹⁴⁴ Sraffa 1991, p. 74. Despite his sceptical response, Sraffa nevertheless, as requested, provided Gramsci with an extensive list of references to studies of Ricardo and relevant literature. Among these is to be found the following bibliographical note: 'Furthermore, Kröner in Leipzig has recently published a volume of Marx entitled *Der historische Materialismus—die Frühschriften*, edited by S. Landhut and J.P. Mayer; It contains, alongside the *Kritik der hegelischen Staatsphilosophie*, many articles from the *Rheinische Zeitung* and other minor texts, a long unpublished work from 1844, entitled *Nationalökonomie und Philosophie: über den Zusammenhang der Nationalökonomie mit Staat, Recht, Moral, und bürgerlichem Leben*, which takes up almost 100 pages. I haven't read this work yet, but obviously it must be essential for clarifying the question' (Sraffa 1991, pp. 74–5).

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Section 3.2.

a thorough study of Ricardo's own writings (to which Gramsci did not have access in prison at any rate), but rather, from a book that Sraffa himself had recommended: Gide's and Rist's *Historie des doctrines économiques*.¹⁴⁶ In March 1932, Gramsci argued for an equivalence between the method of 'supposing that [*supposto che*]' and the concept of 'determinate market':

Brief Notes on Economics. Ugo Spirito and Co. The charge that traditional political economy is conceived of in a 'naturalistic' and 'deterministic' fashion. A baseless accusation, since classical economists do not have to worry much about the 'metaphysical' question of determinism, and all their deductions and calculations are based on the premise 'let us suppose that'. What is this 'suppose that'? Jannaccone, in reviewing Spirito's book in *La Riforma Sociale*, defines the 'let us suppose' as a 'determinate market' and this is correct in the terms of the language of the classical economists. But what is the 'determinate market' and by what in fact is it determined? It will be determined by the fundamental structure of the society in question and it is therefore this structure that one must analyse, identifying those of its [relatively] constant elements which determine the market etc., and the other 'variable and developing' ones that determine conjunctural crises up to the point when even its [relatively] constant elements are modified and the crisis then becomes an organic one.¹⁴⁷

As both Frosini and Krätke have noted, the characterisation of Ricardo's method of abstraction in the formula 'supposing that'

is derived almost literally from the Manual of Gide/Rist, which was available to Gramsci: there this method is characterised as 'hypothetical' and it is even claimed that Marx was 'inspired' by it (cf. Gide/Rist 1929, 161 et sq.).¹⁴⁸

Gramsci's suggestion is thus neither as incomprehensible as Sraffa believed nor as novel as other commentators have supposed;¹⁴⁹ rather, it is merely an

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Sraffa 1991, p. 75.

¹⁴⁷ Q 8, §216; *FSPN*, p. 180. A little over a year earlier, in February 1931, Gramsci first used the concept of 'determinate market' while discussing Graziadei, in terms which implicitly criticise its speculative formulation in 'pure economics' ('reality [...] isn't ever "pure"' (Q 7, §30; *FSPN*, p. 187)). Frosini 2004a reconstructs Gramsci's transformation of this term into a central category of 'critical' i.e. Marxist economics.

¹⁴⁸ Krätke 1998, p. 79.

¹⁴⁹ Boothman 1995, p. xxxviii and p. 512.

almost verbatim repetition of an established, albeit perhaps exaggerated, position in the scholarly literature of the time. It is thus unnecessary to consider at length the veracity of Gramsci's claim, which, in its broad outlines, provides interesting if imprecise terms for considering a decisive moment in the development of economic theory.¹⁵⁰

8.5.3. The 'tendential laws' of the 'determinate market': the 'philology' of 'relations of force'

Much more significant than the correctness or incorrectness of these propositions for comprehending the history of economic thought are the reasons why Gramsci focused upon this formulation and the theoretical conclusions that he draws from this insight for the comprehension of the nature of the philosophy of praxis as a form of thought and conception of the world. The concept of 'determinate market', conceived as a theoretical construction according to the method imputed to Ricardo by Gramsci and not in terms of a 'pure' market, then leads Gramsci to posit a non-speculative conception of 'tendential laws' as having validity within determinate and historically limited social formations (or 'determinate markets') in the form of 'relations of force'. The decisive passage is written in April 1932 (thus, the month following Q 8, §216, and the month preceding Q 10II, §9 and the letter to Tania and Sraffa).

Economic Science. Concept and fact of 'determinate market': that is, the revelation that determinate forces have arisen historically, the operation of which presents itself with a certain 'automatism' that allows a measure of 'predictability' and certainty for individual initiatives. 'Determinate market' is therefore equivalent to saying 'determinate relation of social forces in a determined structure of the productive apparatus' guaranteed by a determinate juridical superstructure. [...]. The 'critique' of political economy starts from the concept of the 'historicity [*storicità*]' of the 'determinate market' and of

¹⁵⁰ Krätke remarks that 'Gramsci's basic thought is completely correct, but something quite different results from a close investigation: Marx needed all of classical political economy, Ricardo is only an element of it [...] All classical political economists, just like their precursors, reason regularly in this "theoretical" way—what would be the case, if? [...]—and operate with more or less clearly formulated assumptions' (Krätke 1998, pp. 78–9). As Krätke further notes, much more decisive for the development of Marxist economic theory is Marx's introduction of an historical dimension to such processes of theoretical model building.

its 'automatism', whereas pure 'economists' posit these elements as 'eternal', 'natural'; the critique analyses the relations of forces that 'determine' the market, evaluates the 'possibilities of modification [*modificabilità*]' connected with the appearance of new elements and their strengthening and presents the 'transitory nature [*caducità*]' and 'replaceable nature [*sostituibilità*]' of the criticised 'science': it studies it as 'life' but also as 'death' and finds at its heart the elements of its inevitable supersession by an 'heir' that will be presumptive until it will have given manifest proofs of vitality etc.¹⁵¹

A 'market' (or more generally, social formation) is thus 'determined' in the sense that it is constituted by relations of force that are in turn determined by their functioning within the market (or social formation). The determination of the given social formation, in both a real and logical sense, thus proceeds by way of identification of these relations of force in order to grasp the formation in its 'historicity': that is, according to the historical dynamics that constitute its 'impure' present, but also according to the historical dynamics already at work within it that offer 'possibilities of modification' in the future.

Gramsci has thus located a non-metaphysical and non-speculative definition of a 'determinate market' by continuing the 'translation' (according to Gramsci's reading, already present *in nuce* in Ricardo) of a potentially speculative hypothesis into realistic and historical terms.¹⁵² 'Supposing that . . . , then' has

¹⁵¹ Q 8, §128.

¹⁵² The 'series of questions to be studied' that Gramsci announces in 'Introduction to the study of philosophy. Speculative immanence and historical and realistic immanence' (Q 10Π, §9) set out, in classic *Ideologiekritik* fashion, both the historical reasons for the emergence of the Ricardian hypothesis and, implicitly at least, its subsequent speculative degeneration in bourgeois economic theory before being 'rescued' by the *Aufhebung* of the philosophy of praxis: '1. to summarise Ricardo's formal scientific principles in their form of empirical canons; 2. to look for the historical origin of these Ricardian principles, which are connected to the rise of economic science itself, that is, to the development of the bourgeoisie as a "concretely world class" and to the subsequent formation of a world market which was already sufficiently "dense" in complex movements for it to be possible to isolate and study necessary laws of regularity; that is, laws of tendency which are not laws in the naturalistic sense or that of speculative determinism, but in a "historicist" sense, valid, that is, to the extent that there exists the "determinate market" or in other words an environment which is organically alive and interconnected in its movements of development. (Economics studies these laws of tendency in so far as they are *quantitative* expressions of phenomena; in the passage from economics to general history the concept of quantity is integrated by that of quality and by the dialectic of quality that becomes quality [*quantity = necessity; quality = freedom*. The dialectic of quantity-quality is identical to that of necessity-freedom]); 3. to establish the connection of Ricardo with Hegel and Robespierre. 4. to consider how

here in fact become (or rather, become once again) 'observing that ..., then ...'. Three conditions prevent observation's (re-) degeneration into speculative consecration: first, the act of observation, rather than claiming a 'supra-historical' viewpoint outside or above the social formation,¹⁵³ acknowledges its partiality, that is, the fact that, as 'critique', it also is a determinate relation of forces within the 'historicity' and 'automatism' of the 'determinate market'; second, what is observed is consequently thus not a static condition viewed as an 'object' from the outside by a 'subject', but the dynamic processes or relations of forces that produce any given configuration, viewed from a determinate position within them; and third, the supposition derived from such observation aims not at the merely mimetic reproduction in theoretical terms of what is observed, but at the delineation of its 'possibilities of modification'.

From the 'mechanical process of abstract generalisation' that Gramsci found in both Michels's sociology and the ahistorical 'determinate market' of 'pure' economics, unaware that it was merely 'a duplicate of the observed fact itself' and therefore a speculative form of the relations of forces that determined it,¹⁵⁴ and from the Crocean 'concept' that claimed to be 'immanent' to mere 'representations', Gramsci has progressed to what Marx described as a 'determinate abstraction'. The generality of a determinate social formation is here grasped as an instance of the combination of the singular elements that give rise to it—and not in the sense of the 'causal value' of 'abstract laws' that 'have a strange resemblance to Plato's pure ideas that are the essence of real earthly facts'.¹⁵⁵ 'Tendential laws', conceived as the theoretical translation of 'relations of force', here become the 'methodological expression' of the importance of ascertaining and specifying particular facts 'in their unmistakable "individuality"'.¹⁵⁶ They are grasped in the first instance in their 'certainty' and not their 'truth': in other words, they are a 'philological' method for the study of the historicity of social formations.

the philosophy of praxis has arrived, from the synthesis of the three living currents to the new conception of immanence, purified of any trace of transcendence and theology.' (Q 10II, §9; *SPN*, pp. 401–2; cf. Q 11, §52; *SPN*, pp. 410–14; cf. also Frosini 2003, pp. 143–9.)

¹⁵³ Q 11, §14; *SPN*, p. 347.

¹⁵⁴ Q 11, §26; *SPN*, p. 430.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Q 11, §25; *SPN*, p. 428.

It is from these considerations that one must start in order to establish what is meant by 'regularity', 'law', 'automatism' in historical facts. It is not a question of 'discovering' a metaphysical law of 'determinism', or even of establishing a 'general' law of causality. It is a question of seeing how in general development relatively 'permanent' forces are constituted that operate with a certain regularity and automatism. Even the law of large numbers, although very useful as a model of comparison, cannot be assumed as the 'law' of social facts.¹⁵⁷

The significance of this passage for Gramsci's search for Marx's new philosophy of immanence cannot be overstated. Against Croce's charge of metaphysical determinism, Gramsci responds that the determinism studied by the philosophy of praxis is the determinism of the 'thing itself', the processes immanent to it that can be theoretically 'represented' in a non-speculative, historical 'tendential law'.¹⁵⁸ Rejecting the immanence of an abstract thought to being, Gramsci has now identified a methodology that aims not to show the immanence of being to thought as an abstract generality (a thesis which, in itself, could be recuperated by a differentiated reading of, for example, Hegel, the-*orist* of objective Spirit). Rather, Gramsci wants to demonstrate that *being-in-history* is already immanent to thought (in the sense that thought is formed on the basis of determinate historical experiences) and, even more importantly, that *theory itself* is a particular mode of historical being, or a *practice*, which, in all the moments of its elaboration, remains immanent to and not transcendent of such historical experience. Any attempt by theory to pretend to transcend its historical determinateness is explained in terms of the expression and mode of unification of class interests in a *politically* overdetermined theoretical form.¹⁵⁹ The challenge now becomes setting this redefinition of the status of

¹⁵⁷ Q 8, §128.

¹⁵⁸ Significantly, immediately after having identified this 'historicist' rather than 'speculative' or 'naturalistic' concept of tendential laws (Q 101, §9; cf. below), Gramsci intensifies his critique both of Croce's reading of Marx and also his claim for the teleological, transcendental and ultimately metaphysical nature of Croce's absolute immanence itself.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. the previously quoted (Q 101, §8; *FSPN*, pp. 347–8) in which Gramsci explains the 'subjective conception of reality' as an 'historical fact', as an 'historical subjectivity of a social group', 'the form of a concrete social content'. More generally on this point, cf. Section 7.2.8. et sqq.

theory to work in a non-speculative way that is adequate to the production of a theory that aims to reinforce transformative dynamics already underway rather than to fix them in the ossification of an eternal present.

Gramsci concludes this note of April 1932 with the claim that

It will be necessary to study the conception of economic laws as it was proposed by David Ricardo (the so-called method of 'given that [*posto che*]'): in it is certainly to be found one of the points of departure of the philosophical experiences of Marx and Engels that led to the development of historical materialism.¹⁶⁰

He is *not*, in the first instance, despite the impression of a cursory reading of these passages, concerned to propose a novel reading of Ricardo's importance for Marx's thought. Once again, it is a heuristic rather than definitive claim, indicating a direction of research rather than an attained result, a 'practical concept'. Paraphrasing Lukács's famous definition of Marxist orthodoxy from the opening essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, we could say that Gramsci is more concerned with 'method' than with the validity or lack of validity of individual theses. By late May 1932, however, when he writes to Tania/Sraffa requesting clarification, Gramsci's thinking will already have gone beyond the question of Ricardo's contribution of specific concepts or methods. Now, Gramsci's aim will be to consider the implications of such a 'philological' political economy for the nature of the philosophy of praxis as a conception of the world, identifying in French politics and, above all, in English political economy (Ricardo in particular) the 'unitary synthetic moment' of the 'new concept of immanence'. It enabled the integration and transformation of three initially distinct socio-political movements into elements of the new *Weltanschauung*, in (potentially) ongoing relations of translation.

8.5.4. Three sources of Marxism or 'historical process still in movement'?

Immanence as the 'unitary synthetic moment' of the philosophy of praxis

The lines in 'Introduction to the study of philosophy. Speculative immanence and historical and realistic immanence' that precede the famous equation 'the philosophy of praxis = Hegel + David Ricardo' emphasise precisely this

¹⁶⁰ Q 8, §128.

theoretical problematic as the horizon of Gramsci's research. The specific case of Ricardo is in fact designed to be merely illustrative of a more general claim regarding the ongoing constitution of the philosophy of praxis.

It is affirmed that the philosophy of praxis was born on the terrain of the highest developments of the culture of the first half of the nineteenth century, a culture represented by classical German philosophy, by classical English economy, and by French Literature and political practice. At the origin of the philosophy of praxis are these three cultural movements. But in which sense must we understand this affirmation? That each of these movements has contributed to the elaboration, respectively, of the philosophy, the economics and the politics of the philosophy of praxis? Or that the philosophy of praxis has synthetically elaborated the three movements, that is, the entire culture of the epoch, and that in the new synthesis, in any of its moments which are examined—theoretical, economic and political moment—one can find as a preparatory 'moment' each of these three movements? This is what seems to me to be the case. And it seems to me that the unitary synthetic moment is to be identified in the new concept of immanence, which has been translated from the speculative form, as put forward by classical German philosophy, into a historicist form with the help of French politics and English classical economics.¹⁶¹

Gramsci here provides an alternative version of the thesis of the three sources of Marxism (with its subsequent two 'component parts'). This thesis was originally formulated via a reworking of the Hegelian-Heinian-Marxian theme of the relation between the French Revolution and German idealism in Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. The architectural metaphor of the 'articulation' of the three national traditions in order to produce a unitary binarian creed (German Philosophy + French Politics + English Political Economy = Marxism = dialectical materialism + historical materialism) was later redeployed by Lenin. It subsequently became a central article of faith of Diamat (as we have seen, invoked by, among many others, the Althusser of *Reading 'Capital'*). Gramsci here proposes something different regarding the sources of Marx's and Engels's thought, in a way that has a profound impact upon the definition of the new conception of the world that emerged

¹⁶¹ Q 1011, §9; *SPN*, pp. 399–400; cf. *FSPN*, p. 512.

from it. Rather than the external articulation of three independent currents of thought (that subsequently maintain their independent efficacy and fields of competence in the new *Weltanschauung*), Gramsci argues that the philosophy of praxis emerged from a dynamic overdetermination of two elements (German philosophy and French politics) by a methodological element of the third (precisely, the immanentistic conception implicit in English political economy). As Badaloni argues,

in substance, therefore, Gramsci not only repeats that classical German philosophy and English political economy are two sources of Marxism, but would like to demonstrate that the second is an important aspect of the transformation of the idealism of the first into an immanentistic conception.¹⁶²

The philosophy of praxis, therefore, redefines the previously established fields of knowledge not as 'component parts' but as 'moments' of its own dynamic overdetermined constitution. It is the 'unitary synthetic moment' of the new concept of immanence that makes such relations of translation possible, for it was only by means of such a method of grasping the theoretical significance of 'relations of force', subsequently 'universalised' 'in an adequate fashion to the whole of human history',¹⁶³ that the founders of the philosophy of praxis were able to recognise the common social content of the three distinct prior cultural 'movements', thus re-elaborating them as 'moments' within a new conception of the world. Each moment is now internally related to the other; that is, they are immanent to each other, because the social practices they sought to comprehend are recognised as determined by the same relations of forces.

This notion of the origins of the philosophy of praxis has an important effect on Gramsci's conception of its nature as a conception of the world. Insofar as it is a conception of the world defined by ongoing relations of translation between different theoretical and practical moments that are immanent to each other, the philosophy of praxis can never attain to the closed systematic form of supposedly 'classical' philosophical doctrines (lusted after by Diamat and its numerous inheritors). Precisely as an absolute historicism founded upon a non-speculative-metaphysical concept of immanence, the philosophy of praxis remains an unfinished project that, by definition, must seek to absorb, or

¹⁶² Badaloni 1981, p. 292.

¹⁶³ *Q* 1011, §9; *SPN*, p. 401.

grasp, the new initiatives and relations of force that define its conditions of possibility. Typically, Gramsci locates the presupposition for a perspective that goes against the 'main currents' of the Marxism of his time precisely in the text to which the orthodoxy referred. Immediately following his affirmation of Ricardo's 'philosophical' importance, polemicising against the speculative immanence of Croce and Gentile, Gramsci turns to a re-reading of Engels's famous proposition in the closing line of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, 'The German working class movement is the inheritor of classical German philosophy'.

How are we to understand Engels's proposition on the inheritance of classical German philosophy? Is it to be understood as a historical circle already closed, in which the absorption of the vital part of Hegelianism is already definitively complete, once and for all, or can it be understood as an historical process still in movement in which the necessity for a philosophical cultural synthesis is being renewed? To me the second answer seems correct: in reality, the reciprocally unilateral position criticised in the first thesis on Feuerbach between materialism and idealism is still being repeated, and now, as then, though in a superior moment, a synthesis is necessary in a moment of further development of the philosophy of praxis.¹⁶⁴

Comprehending the philosophy of praxis as an 'absolute immanence' thus turns out to be the precondition for the revitalisation of the legacy of Marx in Gramsci's time—a revitalisation that is the very form of its vitality in any historical epoch.

8.6. Immanence = theory

The final and most significant element of this research into the new concept of immanence occurs when Gramsci brings the insights gained on the terrain of the critique of political economy into relation with his meditations on the *Theses on Feuerbach*. In so doing, he returns to his initial tentative equation of the new concept of 'immanence' with 'theory' and enriches its concrete

¹⁶⁴ Q 10II, § 10; SPN, p. 402.

determination. Objecting to Croce's interpretation of the *Theses on Feuerbach* as a rejection of all forms of philosophy and its replacement with practical activity, Gramsci argues that it is

much more the case, in the face of the 'scholastic', purely theoretical or contemplative philosophy, of the revindication of a philosophy that produces a corresponding morality, a realising will and that, in the last instance, identifies itself with these.¹⁶⁵

In Gramsci's terms, it is a question of reformulating the so-called perennial questions of philosophy as research themes within a philosophy of praxis and of positing this philosophy as the theoretical moment in the practice of proletarian hegemony. In Labriola's terms, it is a question of producing a '*philosophy [that] is immanent to the things on which it philosophises. From life to thought, and not from thought to life; this is the realistic process*'.¹⁶⁶

The concept of the unity of theory and praxis of the *Theses on Feuerbach* and the closing line of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Gramsci argues, 'is nothing other than the affirmation of the historicity of philosophy in the terms of an absolute immanence, of an "absolute worldliness" [*terrestrità assoluta*]'.¹⁶⁷ According to this new concept of immanence, theory is no longer to be understood as external to a practice to which it must be applied. Rather, in realistic and historical terms, theory itself is to be understood as a determinate activity alongside other activities with its own specific tasks to fulfil, a theoretical 'moment' that can be immanent to the social practices it seeks to comprehend because those practices are already immanent to it. In a note written in May 1933 towards the end of Gramsci's productive intellectual life and after the severe medical crisis that forced him to abandon any hope of ever systematising his prison researches, he makes one final attempt to formulate this relationship between theory and practice in terms of a distinctive notion of *coherence*.

Theory and practice. Since every action is the result of various wills, with a varying degree of intensity and awareness and of homogeneity with the

¹⁶⁵ Q 10II, §31; *FSPN*, p. 384.

¹⁶⁶ Labriola 1965, p. 216.

¹⁶⁷ Q 10II, §31i; *FSPN*, p. 384.

entire complex of the collective will, it is clear that also the theory corresponding to it and implicit in it will be a combination of beliefs and points of view which are equally disordered and heterogeneous. However, in these terms and within these limits, the adhesion of theory to practice exists. If the problem of producing the identity of theory and praxis is posed, it is posed in this sense: to construct, on the basis of a determinate practice, a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the same practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, rendering practice more homogeneous, coherent, efficient in all of its elements, strengthening it to the maximum; or, given a certain theoretical position, to organise the indispensable practical element for setting it to work. The identity of theory and practice is a critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational. This is why the problem of the identity of theory and practice is raised especially in certain so-called transitional moments of history, that is, those moments in which the movement of transformation is at its most rapid, when the practical forces unleashed really demand to be justified in order to be more efficient and expansive; or the theoretical programmes multiply in number, demanding in their turn to be realistically justified, to the extent that they prove themselves assimilable into practical movements, that only thus become more practical and real.¹⁶⁸

8.6.1. 'Rendering practice more coherent'

With the notion of 'a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of [a] practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, rendering practice more [...] coherent', we have arrived at what can be regarded as one of the 'keywords' of the conceptual architecture of the *Prison Notebooks*. For the concept of 'coherence', despite its infrequent appearance, is one of Gramsci's most important 'synthetic' concepts, traversing the border between the strictly philosophical and the strictly political. As with many of Gramsci's central concepts, 'coherence' seems to function as merely an imprecise 'term' in the early notebooks, more asserted generically than given a definite and distinctive Gramscian meaning. However, as with the emergence

¹⁶⁸ *Q* 15, §22; *SPN*, pp. 364–5.

of terms such as 'absolute historicism' and 'immanence', it eventually takes on the status of a genuinely new concept, organising and uniting previous researches and initiating a new phase in the developing conceptuality of the *Prison Notebooks*. As Kate Crehan argues, 'the opposition between coherent and incoherent conceptions of the world' constitutes 'one of the basic threads which runs through all of Gramsci's writings'.¹⁶⁹

At the same time, we would also seem to have arrived at a response *avant la lettre* to one of Althusser's primary objections to Gramsci's emphasis upon the historicist dimensions of the philosophy of praxis. For Althusser argued that such an emphasis was only acceptable if it was thought in terms of a focus, albeit one-sided, upon one of the essential determinations of Marxist theory: 'its practical role in real history'.¹⁷⁰

What *corresponds* here to the concept of 'historicism', in this interpretation, has a precise name in Marxism: it is the problem of the union of theory and practice, more particularly the problem of the union of Marxist theory and the workers' movement.¹⁷¹

Or, as Althusser argued at another moment,

What is authentic in that which Gramsci designates as 'historicism' is substantially the affirmation of the *political* nature of philosophy, the thesis of the *historical* character of social formations (and of the modes of production that compose them), the correlative thesis of the *possibility* of the revolution, the *necessity* of the 'union of theory and practice' etc. Why not call these realities by their name, consecrated by a long tradition?¹⁷²

As we have seen, Gramsci deploys the concept of coherence precisely as a synonym for the 'traditional' Marxist notion of the 'union of theory and practice' and more particularly, with his emphasis upon organising 'the indispensable practical element' for setting such a theory to work, 'the problem of the union of Marxist theory and the workers' movement'. It describes the process in which a theory 'coincides' and 'identifies itself with the decisive

¹⁶⁹ Crehan 2002, p. 113.

¹⁷⁰ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 127.

¹⁷¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 129.

¹⁷² Althusser 1971b, p. 345.

elements' of a practice, *cohering* with it in the original sense of the world. No mere interpretation, genuinely Marxist theory, for Gramsci as for Althusser, attempts to change the world, 'without which', as Althusser acknowledged on more than one occasion, 'Marxism would be no more than the prey of bookworms and passive political functionaries'.¹⁷³

8.6.2. The merely 'formal' difference of coherence

However, it was precisely to this concept of coherence that Althusser objected most vigorously, as an inadequate way of characterising the specificity of philosophy, and Marxist philosophy in particular. Perhaps more than other, more famous features of his critique, it is Althusser's attention to the importance of this concept for Gramsci, despite its infrequency and the scant attention given to it by other commentators, that signals him as one of Gramsci's most attentive readers. In a response to an Italian critic in 1967 (published as an appendix to the 1971 corrected version of the 1968 Italian edition of *Reading 'Capital'*), Althusser repeated many of the objections to Gramsci's definition of philosophy that he had first formulated in the famed chapter 'Marxism Is Not an Historicism'.

Because Gramsci does not think the specific relation which philosophy has with the sciences he tends continuously to reduce and to assimilate completely, almost to a simple formal difference, 'philosophy' to a 'conception of the world'.¹⁷⁴

The critique of an 'absolutely historicist' definition of philosophy, however, was now given a new conceptual focus in these additional remarks.

That which for Gramsci in fact distinguishes philosophy ('of the philosophers') from a conception of the world (of all men: in as much as everyone possesses a conception of the world, Gramsci says that '*everyone is a philosopher*'), is only that which he calls a greater '*coherence*'. It is clear that this difference remains simply formal, because Gramsci qualifies it simply by means of a difference in the degree of '*coherence*', without explaining either the rea-

¹⁷³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 129.

¹⁷⁴ Althusser 1971b, p. 342.

son for such 'coherence' or for such a difference of degree. Gramsci speaks also of the 'systematic' character, of the 'rational' character of philosophy (of the philosophers, and of Marxism), but these terms, which don't explain anything specific, do not do anything but *repeat* in other forms the already affirmed character of coherence.¹⁷⁵

The alternative notion of the defining feature of philosophy offered by Althusser at an early stage of his philosophical development was, as we have seen, the thesis that philosophy, *qua* philosophy, is defined by the 'specific relation' that it maintains with 'the sciences'. This relation is not merely formal, but has a

precise content, defined not by means of 'rationality' *in general*, but by means of *the* specific form of dominant 'rationality' existing at a given moment in the sciences with which philosophy has a specific relation.¹⁷⁶

Like other conceptions of the world, philosophy for the early Althusser is certainly subjected to the determination of politics; but, unlike those merely 'ideological' formations, philosophy is constituted by a theoretical surplus derived from the particular relation that it simultaneously maintains with the sciences. The political constitution of philosophy is therefore overdetermined by its 'scientific constitution', a triangular articulation from which emerges the '*differentia specifica*' of any particular philosophy.

The implication of this double relation constitutes an *original* combination that makes the philosophies really *exist* as philosophies, simultaneously distinct from conceptions of the world and from the sciences. Thus we can comprehend how philosophies carry within themselves conceptions of the world and are even 'carried' by conceptions of the world. [...] At the same time, we can comprehend how they are something very different from *non-philosophical* conceptions of the world, because, unlike simple conceptions of the world, they maintain a specific relation with the sciences.¹⁷⁷

The merely 'coherent' and 'systematic' character of a philosophy, Althusser maintained, was not enough to establish it *as* a philosophy. This was even less

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Althusser 1971b, p. 343.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

the case for Marxist philosophy, burdened by the additional demand that it take cognisance of its dual determination and elevate this perspective to a criterion of theoretical practice. After all, Althusser argued, even conceptions of the world qualitatively distinct from philosophy and from Marxist philosophy in particular, such as theology, could also be regarded as ‘coherent’ and ‘systematic’ in their own peculiar way.¹⁷⁸

8.6.3. Logical coherence

There are indeed numerous passages in the *Prison Notebooks*, particularly in the early notebooks, in which Gramsci seems to use the term ‘coherence’ in the sense assumed by Althusser’s remarks. ‘Coherence’, that is, seems to refer to a logical relation of premises and conclusions constituting an internally consistent system. Thus, for instance, in a note written between May–August 1930, Gramsci argues that Bukharin’s assumption that the philosophy of historical materialism is philosophical materialism is not always ‘logically coherent’ with his presentation;¹⁷⁹ in a note on Machiavelli in Notebook Eight from February 1932,¹⁸⁰ he muses about ‘what place political activity must take in a systematic’—he adds in parentheses, ‘(coherent and consistent [*consequente*])’—‘conception of the world, in a philosophy of praxis’; in late 1932, Aldo Capasso’s thought is dismissed as ‘not very coherent’;¹⁸¹ and, in the same notebook in February 1933,¹⁸² Gramsci argues that the difference between ‘professional’ philosophers and other men (assuming, of course, that all men are ‘philosophers’ in a non-professional or non-technical sense) is not a qualitative but only a quantitative difference, indicating a more or less greater ‘homogeneity’, ‘coherence’ or ‘logical nature’. Although not the only essential feature of their practice, the professional or technical philosopher ‘thinks’, according to Gramsci, with a ‘greater logical strictness, with a greater coherence’. As if sensing Althusser’s objection in advance, Gramsci himself even admits that theology has a certain degree of such a logical coherence:

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Q 4, § 13.

¹⁸⁰ Q 8, § 61.

¹⁸¹ Q 10II, § 48; *SPN*, p. 349.

¹⁸² Q 10II, § 52; *SPN*, p. 347.

Also theology begins from a certain series of hypotheses and then erects upon these a whole massive edifice which is soundly coherent and strictly derived, [Gramsci notes, before concluding rhetorically:] but is theology therefore a science?¹⁸³

All of these uses would seem to conform to the 'traditional' definition or 'pseudo-concept'—to adopt a phrase from Croce—of 'coherence' that Althusser undoubtedly had in mind. Derived from the Latin *cohaerentia* (the substantive derived from *cohaerere*, to be connected or united together), the term 'coherence' had led a life in the shadows of the Western philosophical tradition, a 'marginal' concept implicit in the adjective 'coherent' that has often been used a synonym for consistent and logical argumentation and presentation. According to this usage (consolidated by certain tendencies in twentieth-century analytic philosophy), coherence is limited to an agreement of non-contradiction between concepts or categories. It explicitly does not refer to any theory of correspondence or conjoining of the conceptual and that to which it refers. For Hartmann, interpreting Plato's 'community [*koínoonia*] of ideas', coherence refers to the unity of categories in a *Kategorienschicht*, which unites together and defines such categories in terms of their common determination.¹⁸⁴ If these and related logical definitions were indeed the only senses in which Gramsci uses the term coherence, Althusser's rejection of it as a defining characteristic of philosophy's difference from other conceptions of the world would therefore seem to be well founded, even according to Gramsci's own criteria of historical concretion and the political critique of speculation.

8.6.4. Coherence and the capacity to act

However, Gramsci also employs a second meaning of 'coherence', extending the presuppositions of the first logical meaning to consider the problem of the historicity and the historical efficacy of a given conception of the world. Considered in this sense, philosophy, or rather a certain practice of philosophy, can possess a greater degree of coherence than other 'conceptions of the world' only insofar as it has made such historical elements explicit and fundamental organising features. In other superstructural forms—'ideological' rather than

¹⁸³ Q 10II, § 32iii; *FSPN*, p. 172; June–August 1932.

¹⁸⁴ Hartmann 1940, pp. 45–9.

‘philosophical’, according to the definition we explored in Chapter Seven—such historical elements are present, if at all, in only a partial and limited sense. This alternative concept of coherence in Gramsci draws upon the first strictly ‘logical’ meaning, insofar as it too demands conclusions that are consistent with their premises, according to non-contradictory deductive logic. It goes beyond a solely conceptual definition, however, in terms of how it thinks the temporal relations between such premises or determinations, on the one hand, and conclusions or determined states, on the other. Rather than a merely ‘formal’ relation of correspondence between the pre-determined co-ordinates of a logically consistent system or theoretical structure, it implies a substantive integration of socially and politically determined practical and theoretical ‘moments’ in their historical evolution. This sense of coherence is not simply given in a synchronic present that is identical with itself, but one which must, on the contrary, be actively created by conscious attempts to overcome the fundamentally contradictory nature of the present, its fracturing by conflicting residues from different moments of the past. As Haug has noted, this sense of coherence

does not deny contradictoriness or inner turmoil, that is, that which from the standpoint of Aristotelian logic would be inconsistency, nor does it deny decentredness [*Dezentriertheit*]. Rather, it presupposes precisely these anti-Aristotelian characteristics.¹⁸⁵

The result of the production of coherence, both on the level of the individual and on that of social groups or classes, is an integration of practical and theoretical elements that increase not only logical consistency, but also the capacity to act.

8.6.5. *Una persona coerente*

Examples of this second, related but distinct, meaning of coherence and its implications for the definition of the specificity of philosophy can be found in the earlier notebooks. Resonances of a meaning of coherence in relation to the theory of the person and personality common in everyday popular Italian are here integrated with the meaning of strictly logical derivation current among

¹⁸⁵ Haug 2006, p. 26.

the 'tribe of the theoreticians'.¹⁸⁶ 'Una persona coerente' in the Italian popular imagination is not merely somebody who 'makes sense'; that is, someone who pronounces non-contradictory propositions in a logically consistent series or derivation. Rather, such a person's acts in the present exhibit a continuity or at least *concordia* with beliefs, commitments and obligations assumed in the past. Between the word and the deed there falls no shadow. To be 'incoherent' in this sense involves too large an unresolved discrepancy between past and present, similar to what Freud described as the way in which the hysteric is 'haunted' by the past, which impedes the capacity to act and respond to challenges in the present in a meaningful and purposive way.¹⁸⁷

Thus Gramsci notes in October–November 1930 that the

objection of *senso comune* that can be made against scepticism is this: that to be coherent with himself the sceptic should do nothing else but live like a vegetable, without involving himself in the business of ordinary life.¹⁸⁸

In another early note from late 1930 dedicated to Machiavelli and the difference between 'political' and 'aesthetic', 'lyrical' and 'artistic intuition' ('one can speak of the political art only as a metaphor'), he argues that collective political leadership poses the problem of how to maintain a group 'unitary and coherent in its continuing work'.¹⁸⁹ Perhaps most revealingly, in a note entitled 'Philosophy of Praxis' from February 1932,¹⁹⁰ Gramsci uses the term 'incoherent' to describe Croce's eminently 'logically consistent' critique of Marxism, or more exactly, the contradictions between Croce's different critiques of Marxism in different political conjunctures. In his later works (particularly following 1917), Croce had maintained that it was impossible to talk of Marx as a philosopher and thus of a Marxist philosophy because Marx had aimed to 'invert' not merely Hegel's philosophy but philosophy as such, thereby replacing it with 'practical activity'. Gramsci notes a logical discrepancy in this claim (if negating philosophy is itself conceived as an eminently philosophical act, Croce's dismissal of Marx the philosopher would seem to indicate more

¹⁸⁶ Q 9, §63; *SPN*, p. 201.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Freud and Breuer 2004.

¹⁸⁸ Q 5, §39; *SPN*, p. 374.

¹⁸⁹ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, p. 252.

¹⁹⁰ Q 8, §198.

impatience than philosophical reflection), but focuses much more strongly on the lack of continuity between the 'young' and 'mature' Croce.

In the volume *Historical Materialism* etc, in a note, Croce explicitly acknowledges as justified Labriola's attempt to construct on Marxism a 'philosophy of praxis'. If you look at everything that Croce has written on Marxism, both systematically and incidentally, you can see how contradictory and incoherent he is from one text to the next, in the different periods of his activity as a writer.¹⁹¹

Croce had maintained that the development of his thought, though marked by transitions and self-critiques, exhibited an underlying unity of inspiration similar to the essential unity he posited in the concept of *Spirito* and believed to see incorporated in the nineteenth century as a 'history of freedom'. Gramsci's accusation of incoherence therefore took aim not merely at Croce the theorist, but more importantly, at Croce the public figure and political actor. Coherence here, in other words, is emphasised as an historical practice, or perhaps even an historicist disposition or orientation *par excellence*.

8.6.6. The incoherence of *senso comune*

Despite traces in the earlier notebooks, however, the decisive moment when this second sense of coherence begins to predominate, signalling its transformation from a mere term in the rhetorical structure of the *Prison Notebooks* to a genuine concept in the philosophy of praxis, occurs, as with so many of Gramsci's new discoveries, in Notebook Eleven in the second half of 1932. It is in Notebook Eleven that Gramsci, reorganising his previous critiques of Bukharin, makes a decisive conceptual breakthrough and stabilises in his conceptual vocabulary the new relation (prefigured at least since Notebook Eight) between, on the one hand, the philosophy of praxis, and, on the other, *senso comune*. The 'philosophy of praxis', Gramsci's distinctive intervention into the debates of the 1920s contesting the inheritance of Lenin's philosophical and political legacy, is no longer defined primarily in terms of its horizontal relation with and superiority to other philosophies, be they either idealist regressions or vulgar materialist diversions. Nor is it defined in distinction from 'ideol-

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

ogy', for the philosophy of praxis is itself an 'ideology', or a form in which men 'become conscious of their conflicts'. Rather, its central feature is now posited as the distinctive vertical and paedagogical relation which it, and it alone as a philosophy that thinks the centrality of *praxis*, is able to establish with *senso comune*, 'the "folklore" of philosophy' as Gramsci has previously defined it in late 1931, whose 'fundamental character is to be a divided, incoherent, inconsistent conception of the world'.¹⁹²

'Incoherence' here refers to both a logical and political sense of the word, for the incoherence or inconsistency of *senso comune* is integrally related to the lack of coherence between different historical times and consequent lack of ability to act of those partaking in it, hysterically overdetermined by a past they can neither comprehend nor lay to rest.¹⁹³ Incoherence is, in fact, the 'normal' condition of existence of the majority of social practices, particularly those that 'spontaneously' emerge from social layers still trapped in a structurally subaltern position. The experience of the subaltern classes, confined to the terrain of a 'civil society' subjugated by the existing 'political society' of the dominant class, is one of a continual molecular transformation, of disaggregations that decrease the capacity to act of both the individual and the class to which they belong.¹⁹⁴ In this perspective, the forging of coherence, or the composition of

¹⁹² Q 8, §173; *SPN*, p. 326. Nicola Badaloni argues that 'in Gramsci's thought, there is a transition from "historicism", as a theory of the transitory nature of beliefs, to a "philosophy of praxis", as an instrument of selection, of decision and of the fixing of such beliefs. [...] The contribution of the "absolute historicism" to such a philosophy of praxis thus consists in the maximum limitation of the necessity of events within a given situation' (Badaloni 1981, pp. 306–8). While Badaloni, in my opinion, overemphasises the distinction between 'absolute historicism' and 'philosophy of praxis' for Gramsci, he is nevertheless correct to detect a transition in Gramsci's thinking, which should be properly located in 1932 in the new comprehension of the political urgency of deepening the philosophy of praxis's relation to *senso comune*.

¹⁹³ Kate Crehan captures one dimension of this process when she argues that 'a key dimension of inequality for Gramsci is the inability of subaltern people to produce coherent accounts of the world they live in that have the potential to challenge the existing hegemonic accounts (which by definition see the world from the perspective of the dominant) in any effective way. I stress "effective" here since Gramsci certainly never denied that subaltern peoples had their own conceptions of the world, he just sees these as inherently fragmentary, incoherent and contradictory, and as lacking the kind of clear, rigorous insight into how local environments of oppression are located within larger economic and political realities, which is essential if a subaltern account is to have any hope of becoming genuinely counter-hegemonic' (Crehan 2002, p. 87).

¹⁹⁴ In the general economy of the *Prison Notebooks*, the concept of coherence stands opposed to that of 'molecular' transformations. As we have seen, Gramsci identifies *trasformismo*, or the molecular absorption of leading elements of a class into another

‘composite bodies’, is an ineluctable moment in the formation of a class capable of exercising hegemony. The philosophy of praxis’s central task in this process becomes the elevation of a given *senso comune* into *un buon senso*, or the task of giving the practically-focused *senso comune* a level of critical self-awareness regarding its historical determination that allows it to break with the incoherence and passivity imposed upon it by an incoherent present. At the same time, this engagement transforms philosophy itself: no longer the ‘incoherent’ reconciliation of contradictory interests, philosophy is forced to recognise its own foundation in *senso comune*’s striving for coherence and the capacity to act.

8.6.7. Platonic anti-Platonism

‘Notes for an Introduction and a Beginning to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture. 1. *Some Preliminary Points of Reference*’,¹⁹⁵ composed in June–July 1932, one of the longest entries in all of the *Prison Notebooks*, is particularly significant for the development of this new notion of coherence. Here, Gramsci employs what may be referred to as an ‘anti-Platonist Platonic allegory’ in order to bring the consequences of his only seemingly unrelated reflections into sharper focus. Plato’s *Republic* proposes a presentation of the just city in order to see more clearly the efficacy of justice in the individual soul; analysis of the larger unit is used to throw light upon the smaller. Gramsci’s procedure, on the other hand, similar to the method adopted in Plato’s late ‘dialectical’ dialogues, sets out from given limited forms in order to attain to a more comprehensive perspective that goes far beyond them, redefining in its turn the point of departure. In Gramsci’s own terms, elements from his researches into the social and historical determination of the person [*la persona*], inspired

class’s project, as one of the primary political-institutional mechanisms of passive revolution (Q 8, § 36). Molecular transformations involve the breaking down or prevention of emergence of composite bodies on the terrain of a genuine class politics, decreasing the capacity to act. However, as with so many of his other categories, he also develops a concept of molecular transformations in terms of the ‘political dimensions of the personal’. Most significantly, Gramsci deploys the term in his reflection on his personal experience of incarceration in several letters to Tania, which he then further inscribes under the banner of his distinctive notion of the ‘person’ as an historical ‘ensemble’ of social relations. See the following chapter for a fuller discussion of Gramsci’s ‘anti-subjectivist’ historicist explanation of the category of the subject, particularly Section 9.1.4. et sqq.

¹⁹⁵ Q 11, § 12.

by his own personal experiences and suffering in the carceral régime, are 'translated' into the register of the historical efficacy of philosophy—and then in turn 're-translated' back into terms of its instantiation in the individual as the elementary 'cell' of hegemonic struggle. 'Remark I' of this note concludes thus:

When the conception of the world is not critical and coherent, but accidental and disjointed [...] one's own personality is composed in a bizarre way: there are elements of the caveman and principles of the most modern and advanced science, prejudices of all past, local bigoted historical phases and intuitions of a future philosophy, as it will be appropriate for a globally united human species. To criticise one's own conception of the world means, therefore, to make it unitary and coherent and to raise it up to the point reached by the most advanced thought in the world. [...] The beginning of critical elaboration is the consciousness of that which really is, that is, a 'know yourself' as a product of the historical process which has left behind an infinity of traces without an inventory. It is necessary to compile such an inventory from the outset.¹⁹⁶

The compilation of such an inventory and the recognition of the historical determinations and the necessary connection between elements of a personality which before were only bizarrely and contradictorily placed alongside one another, is then immediately, at the beginning of 'Remark II' of the same note, translated into the terms of the historical determinateness of philosophy. 'In the most immediate and narrowest sense', Gramsci argues,

one cannot be a philosopher, that is, have a critically coherent conception of the world, without being conscious of its historicity, of the phases of development represented by it and of the fact that it stands in contradiction to other conceptions or to elements of other conceptions. One's own conception of the world responds to determinate problems posed by reality that in their actuality are precisely determined and 'original'. How is it possible to think the present, and a precisely determined present with a mode of thought that was worked out for problems of the often very distant and superseded past?

¹⁹⁶ Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 342.

If this happens, it means that one is an 'anachronism' in one's own time, a fossil, and not living in the modern world, or at the least that one is bizarrely 'composite'.¹⁹⁷

A 'critically coherent conception of the world' is here defined not merely in terms of its internal logical consistency. Crucially, having made a detour via the notion of a personal coherence, of an integration of elements of the personality and recognition of their historical determination, Gramsci now applies the same criteria to philosophy itself: a philosophy's coherence is intimately related to the level of its consciousness of its own historicity and integration of this consciousness in its continuing philosophical practice. In order to be genuinely coherent, it is not enough that conclusions should follow from premises formally and in general; the determined necessity of such conclusions in their specific situation must both become a principle of historical consciousness and, from there, be elevated to an organising principle of action on a mass basis. Furthermore, the capacity to attain such a level of coherence is now posited as a criterion within the 'philosophical' itself. The more a philosophy is able to exert its influence upon the *senso comune* that constitutes its 'social basis', rendering it more coherent, the more fully it becomes genuinely philosophical, that is, an 'historical fact' rather than merely individual elaboration.

Creating a new culture does not only mean making one's own individual 'original' discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means to diffuse critically already discovered truths, to 'socialise' them, as it were, and even to make them become the basis of vital actions, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order. For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in a unitary way about the contemporary real is a 'philosophical' fact far more important and 'original' than the discovery [*ritrovamento*] by some philosophical 'genius' of a new truth that remains the property of small intellectual groups of intellectuals.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Q 11, § 12; SPN, p. 325. Or, as Gramsci soon after states, emphasising the difference between the political pedagogy of the philosophy of praxis and that of institutions such as the Catholic Church: 'is a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialised culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to "*senso comune*" and scientifically coherent, it never forgets to remain in contact with the

Here, then, is the new relation Gramsci has stabilised between philosophy and *senso comune*. To use the terms Gramsci had employed in his critique of Croce's distinction between philosophy and ideology, the difference between them is 'quantitative' rather than 'qualitative': more precisely, it is a difference in their level of coherence, in both a logical and historical sense. Philosophy in this perspective is indeed distinct from *senso comune*, offering a knowledge 'superior' to the ideological obviousness of the latter, as Althusser demanded. However, philosophy only becomes such by acknowledging that it is dependent upon *senso comune* as the raw material of its own development. *Senso comune* is here grasped as immanent to philosophy—but philosophy, conceived as a conception of the world of the masses, is also inherent to *senso comune* as its immanent critique.¹⁹⁹ In this 'supra-logical' conception, the incoherence of *senso comune* is not the negation of the coherence of philosophy; rather, at least for the philosophy of praxis, it is its precondition, the 'ground' from which such coherence emerges.

A philosophy of praxis cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise, as superseding the existing mode of thinking and existing concrete thought (the existing cultural world). First of all, therefore, it must be a criticism of '*senso comune*', basing itself initially, however, on *senso comune* in order to demonstrate that 'everyone' is a philosopher and that it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity.²⁰⁰

"simple" and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve? Only by this contact does a philosophy become "historical", purify itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and become "life".' (Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 330.)

¹⁹⁹ 'Perhaps it is useful "practically" to distinguish philosophy from *senso comune* in order better to indicate the passage from one moment to the other: in philosophy the features of individual elaboration of thought are the most salient; in *senso comune*, on the other hand, it is the diffuse, uncoordinated features of a generic form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment. But every philosophy has a tendency to become the *senso comune* of a fairly limited environment (that of all the intellectuals). It is a matter therefore of starting with a philosophy which already enjoys, or could enjoy, a certain diffusion, because it is connected to and implicit in practical life, and elaborating it so that it becomes a renewed *senso comune* possessing the coherence and the sinew of individual philosophies: this cannot happen if the demand of cultural contact with the "simple" is not continually felt' (Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, p. 330).

²⁰⁰ Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, pp. 330–1.

Thus Gramsci retranslates this notion of the internal dislocation and potential articulation of philosophy and *senso comune* back into the terms of the individual. The individual is here grasped as the elementary ensemble of social relations, or a 'composite body' in which the dynamics of the social formation are found to be at work in a 'molecular' fashion. Just as *senso comune* is 'confused' and 'bizarrely' compounded, so the individual is found to contain different potentials, presently distorted by their incoherent and uncritical composition. The first step towards resolving such contradictions lies precisely in grasping them as *social* rather than merely personal contradictions, a struggle on the *Kampfbplatz* of the individual that Gramsci immediately translates into the terms of his theory of *hegemony* as the horizon of their resolution.

The active man of the masses operates practically, but doesn't have a clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless is a knowing of the world in so far as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or a contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his collaborators in the practical transformation of reality; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this 'verbal' conception is not without consequences: it holds together a specific social group, influences moral conduct and the direction of will, in a more or less energetic way, which can reach a point in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity. The critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies', of opposing directions, first in the ethical field, then in that of politics, in order to arrive at a superior elaboration of one's own conception of the real. Consciousness of being part of a determinate hegemonic force (that is to say, political consciousness) is the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice are finally unified. Thus the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of 'distinction', of 'separation', in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real and complete possession of a unitary and coherent conception of

the world. This is why it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one, because it necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of the real that has gone beyond *senso comune* and has become, if only within still narrow limits, critical.²⁰¹

The 'political development of the concept of hegemony' in the Russian Revolution and particularly in Lenin's final theorisations is presented as a 'great philosophical' as well as 'politico-practical' advance because it transforms the ideological terrain (i.e. *senso comune*) from which philosophy emerges.²⁰² Hegemony, conceived as an active relation of dialectical pedagogy between *senso comune* and critical elements of the philosophy of praxis, builds the coherence of presently disparate elements (of classes, within individuals)—and thereby transforms the grounds and capacities of philosophy itself. A merely 'speculative' philosophy, separate from and observing reality, loses all meaning in the face of this productive conception of the relationship between theory and practice, or of an immanence of being to thought, of relations of force to theory, that increases the potentiality of both. Only by acknowledging this determination, and setting to work on it, can the unity of theory and practice be achieved not as a 'mechanical fact', of external addition, but as a 'part of the historical process', as a relationship of dialectical mutual implication.

We can thus see that the formulation of 'rendering practice more [...] coherent',²⁰³ written less than a year after the extensive Q 11, § 12 in May 1933, has a much more precise meaning than a merely 'formal distinction'. Rather, it refers directly to that 'name, consecrated by a long tradition', which Althusser argued was neglected by Gramsci's analysis: the unity of theory and praxis.²⁰⁴ At the same time, it proposes a distinctive *reformulation and precision* of that 'long tradition': no longer the merely formal *unity* of theory and practice, Gramsci proposes the much more difficult task of thinking the production of their *identity* in a renewed concept of *praxis*. As we have seen, Gramsci posed the problem in the following terms.

²⁰¹ Q 11, § 12; *SPN*, pp. 333–4; cf. Q 8, § 169.

²⁰² Cf. Section 6.2.2.

²⁰³ Q 15, § 22; *SPN*, p. 365.

²⁰⁴ Althusser 1971b, p. 345.

If the problem of producing the identity of theory and practice is posed, it is posed in this sense: to construct, on the basis of a determinate practice, a theory that, coinciding and identifying itself with the decisive elements of the same practice, may accelerate the historical process taking place, rendering practice more homogeneous, coherent, efficient in all of its elements, strengthening it to the maximum; or, given a certain theoretical position, to organise the indispensable practical element for setting it to work. The identity of theory and praxis is a critical act, by means of which practice is demonstrated to be rational and necessary or theory to be realistic and rational.²⁰⁵

8.7. The identity of theory and practice

The redefinition of the thesis of the unity of theory and practice as the (potential) *identity* of theory and practice has profound effects when viewed in the light of the Western philosophical tradition. Gramsci is arguing that there is a precise difference between, on the one hand, Marx's attempt to comprehend the dialectical implication, or identity in difference, of theory and practice and, on the other hand, the numerous attempts to unite theory and practice from a contemplative-philosophical perspective, including those of prior 'philosophies of praxis'. Although it is often taken to be distinctive to the Marxist *Weltanschauung*, the thesis of the (at least potential) unity of theory and practice is, in fact, one of the most perennial claims and ambitions of the philosophical tradition, its most 'idealist' tendencies not excluded: it was not, after all, a love of isolated speculative abstraction that prompted Plato to set sail for Syracuse.²⁰⁶ As Gramsci notes in late 1932,

it appears without doubt that every conception of the world and every philosophy has been concerned with this problem [of the unity of theory and practice].²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Q 15, §22. Cf. also 10II, §31; *FSPN*, p. 384: 'a philosophy that produces' and 'identifies itself' with 'a corresponding morality' and 'a realising will'.

²⁰⁶ As we have previously noted (cf. Section 7.3.2.), Gramsci defines 'the history of the philosophies of the philosophers' 'as the history of the philosophies of the philosophers, is the history of attempts and ideological initiatives undertaken by a specific class of people to change, correct or perfect the conceptions of the world that exist in any particular age and thus to change the norms of conduct that go with them; in other words, to change practical activity as a whole' (Q 10II, §17; *SPN*, p. 344).

²⁰⁷ Q 11, §54; *SPN*, p. 364.

The decisive question is the particular way in which any particular philosophy attempts to think the unity of theory and practice. Croce himself had attempted to guarantee the unity of theory and practice by means of an idealist deformation of Vico's anti-Cartesian maxim 'Verum ipsum factum'. From Vico's perspective of knowledge as an active relation between man and the world (the 'true' being limited to cases in which *praxis* united acting subject and the object of action, which was thereby 'known' in a full sense), Croce, in fact, ended up re-introducing a contemplative passivity in which action is subordinated to knowledge; 'the true is the made' was interpreted in a tautological sense, namely, that 'the true' [knowledge] was itself already 'made', or in other words, the proposition of the immanence of truth to doing, of thought to being, in a variation on post-Kantian idealist conceptions of immanence:

knowledge is a form of doing and that one knows that which one does, in which 'to do' here has a particular meaning, so particular in fact that it finally means nothing more than 'to know', that is, the phrase resolves itself into a tautology.²⁰⁸

More generally, Gramsci argued that the proposition of the unity of theory and practice often involved a privileging of the former as an origin that found its *telos* in the latter, *telos* being rigorously subordinated to origin. Such a view is predominant in a tradition for which the *Logos* figures as the origin of the world, as Gramsci noted:

Affirmation of Aquinas and Scholasticism: 'Intellectus speculativus extensione fit practicus', Theory by simple extension becomes practice—in other words, the affirmation of the necessary connection between the order of ideas and that of action.²⁰⁹

It was *also* present, however, in other philosophical tendencies that initially seem to place the accent more firmly on the side of practice, degrading theory to the role of mere 'complement', 'accessory', or, in a revealing phrase, 'handmaid [*ancella*]' of practice—including and perhaps above all in 'recent developments of the philosophy of praxis'.²¹⁰ Theory as the 'handmaid' of

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 334. These 'recent developments' of Marxist theory had been prefigured in Q 8, §169, in November of 1931. Gramsci's reference was to the debate in

practice might at first sight seem to involve a valorisation of practice, which theory can then merely follow or ‘shadow’; such a proposition therefore differs from, for example, a scholastic perspective insofar as it seems to assign primacy not to thought but to being. In matters of ‘truth’, however, the metaphysical schema is retained; it is theory and theory alone that is competent to adjudicate on the truth-content of a practice, or to provide it with confirmation. The relationship remains ‘mechanistic’ insofar as the unity of theory and practice is conceived as the external articulation of elements whose separation is dogmatically asserted, precisely in order subsequently to unite them. Theory’s role in this conception, in an inversion of idealistic/theological notions, is that of reflecting, guaranteeing or ratifying the results of practice with the force of its monopoly of (speculative) truth.

Gramsci, on the other hand, maintains that the philosophy of praxis poses the question in completely different terms: not the unification of separate elements, but the production of the *identity* of theory and practice, not just as a ‘matter of mechanical fact’, but as ‘a part of the historical process’,²¹¹ as a ‘critical act’.²¹² In the perspective of the new concept of immanence, the practical efficacy of theory is not dogmatically asserted, but is demonstrated in the search for the practical origins and efficacy of theory itself. Similarly, the theoretical paucity of practice is not presupposed, but a practice is comprehended in terms of its instantiation of ‘theoretical’ elements, even those ‘composite’ ones of *senso comune*. The problem therefore becomes the production of a theory that is a ‘practice within a practice’, or a theory that comprehends its own conditions of possibility as the very practices that it seeks to comprehend and transform. No mere ‘complement’, ‘accessory’ or ‘supplement’, theory here is conceived as a relationship of ‘dialectical paedagogy’, or, in another of Gramsci’s conceptual registers, an experimental-scientific practice situated between

the Soviet Union between the ‘dialecticians’, headed by Deborin, and the ‘mechanists’, among whom were Bukharin and Bogdanov. Gramsci greeted this debate as the possibility for a (philosophical, but also more general) renewal in the Soviet Union. Cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 206 et sqq. Such was the enthusiasm with which he followed this debate’s development that he asked Tania to send Julia a book by a ‘modern Italian philosopher’ i.e. Croce on Hegel (to which he later refers in a letter from 10 April 1933, cf. Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 287–8). He attempted to theorise the historical significance of these developments under the rubric of ‘Renaissance/Reformation’, explored in Frosini 2003.

²¹¹ Q 11, § 12; SPN, p. 333.

²¹² Q 15, § 22; SPN, p. 365.

the 'subjective' and the 'objective', in an act of continual mutual correction.

The intimate relation of this seemingly strictly 'philosophical' thesis with Gramsci's political theory consists in their common presuppositions. Just as Gramsci's analysis of the capitalist state as a hegemonic relation led him to propose the possibility of a self-regulation of a (civil) society that had dispensed with the need for a spiritual unification in the political, so Gramsci's analysis of human (relations of) knowledge as the theoretical form of hegemonic relations of force leads him to suggest the possibility of a relation of knowledge that can acknowledge its eminently practical status, thus dispensing with its compensatory need to unify the diverse in a speculative fashion. The production of the identity of theory and practice then becomes the critical art of finding, on the one hand, the adequate theoretical form of a practice, capable of increasing its capacity to act, or, on the other hand, the adequate practical form of a theory, capable of increasing its capacity to know.²¹³ Crucially, Gramsci poses the question in concrete terms: as 'a part of the historical process',²¹⁴ the problem of the identity of theory and practice, as 'a combination of beliefs and points of view, equally disordered and heterogeneous' is posed on the basis of real movements that are already underway,²¹⁵ in terms of the social forces in which such an active relation to the world can assume the 'value of "material forces"'.²¹⁶ The practical forms of this realisation of theory will be the theme of the penultimate chapter of this study.

²¹³ Cf. Section 3.4.2.

²¹⁴ Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 333.

²¹⁵ Q 15, §22; *SPN*, p. 364.

²¹⁶ Q 4, §45.

Chapter Nine

‘An Absolute Humanism of History’

From the theoretical stand-point, Marxism is no more a historicism than it is a humanism. [...] in many respects both historicism and humanism depend on the same ideological problematic; [...] *theoretically speaking*, Marxism is, in a single movement and by virtue of the unique epistemological rupture which established it, an anti-humanism and an anti-historicism.¹

To a much greater extent than even his attack upon Gramsci's absolute historicism, Althusser's rejection of the *Prison Notebooks*'s 'absolute humanism' was an authorless theatre in which the *dramatis personae* stepped forward in borrowed robes in order to do mock battle with absent antagonists. As we have seen, *Reading 'Capital'* argued that the humanist and historicist problematic underlying Gramsci's thought originally emerged in post-World-War I revolutionary leftism, with its appeal to the 'will' to make the revolution and rejection of the mechanism of the Second International.² It was then reactivated, by 'usually a generous or skilful but "rightist" misappropriation', in the post-Stalin period,³ now

¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.

² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 140.

³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 119.

reinforced by a 'canonical' reference to Marx's rediscovered youthful works. In reality, it was the political position represented by this latter-day avatar and not its supposed theoretical predecessor that constituted the true object of Althusser's polemic. Just as the critique of the *Prison Notebooks*'s absolute historicism was more appropriately deployed against other, 'weaker' forms of historicism from his own time, so Althusser's rejection of Gramsci's 'absolute humanism of history' was aimed against very different positions that had emerged in the French Communist Party and the international Communist movement after 1956. These positions were encapsulated in the slogans 'Marxism is the humanism of our time' and 'Everything for Man'. The 'socialist humanism' of the post-1956 conjuncture (penetrating to, or rather, captured by, sections of the leadership, particularly following the Sino-Soviet split) rallied around 'the prophetic promise' Marx made in the 1844 *Manuscripts*: '*Communism [...] as the real appropriation of the human essence through and for men [...] this communism as a fully developed naturalism—Humanism*'.⁴ A new 'orthodoxy' aimed to develop this intuition not merely in political terms, but as a refoundation of Marxist theory in the wake of the demise of Stalinist Diamat's status as the 'official' Marxist philosophy of the international Communist movement.

9.1. The humanist controversy

Althusser fired his opening volleys against this current in the essay 'Marxism and Humanism'. His intention was to offer an alternative refoundation, 'from the left', of Marxist theory and Marxist philosophy in particular. The essay was originally written in October 1963, following an invitation to participate in a symposium on 'Socialist Humanism' by Erich Fromm; Fromm promptly declined to publish it. It was eventually published almost simultaneously in both French and Italian in mid-1964 and subsequently collected in *For Marx* (1965).⁵ Against recent 'revisionist' changes in the Soviet Union and those pending in the French Communist Party, 'Marxism and Humanism' advanced the thesis that Marx's thought had been constituted by a radical

⁴ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 3, p. 296; cf. Althusser 1969, p. 222.

⁵ Althusser recounts the genesis of 'Marxism and Humanism' in mock-heroic fashion in 'The Humanist Controversy' (1967), now published in Althusser 2003.

break in 1845 with 'every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man'.⁶ Althusser argued that this 'unique rupture' contained three indissociable elements that defined the theoretical status of historical and dialectical materialism:

1. The formation of a theory of history and politics based on radically new concepts: the concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc.
2. A radical critique of the *theoretical* pretensions of every philosophical humanism.
3. The definition of humanism as an *ideology*.⁷

'This rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail', Althusser declared. 'It is Marx's scientific discovery'.⁸ Revealed as ideological, humanist themes of a 'human nature', 'transparency', 'subject' and 'essence' were driven from the domain of theory. *Theoretical* anti-humanism constituted the epistemological precondition for the emergence of a properly scientific theory of the overdetermination and articulation of social formations grasped in their specificity. In its turn, this new scientific theory of social formations implied a redefinition of philosophy in terms of a non-ideological and non-universal conception of praxis, denying an 'empiricism of the subject' and an 'idealism of the essence'.⁹

The adjective 'theoretical' was often ignored by Althusser's more impatient critics, or regarded as tautological (seemingly based upon the supposition that 'theory' itself implied a negation of the 'real' to which a humanism would supposedly give deference). Thus E.P. Thompson's polemically amusing but grossly inaccurate characterisation of Althusserian 'Theory' suggested that Althusser's work, when not 'Stalinism theorised as ideology', was a latter day 'Gradgrindism'.¹⁰ Yet, as Althusser himself emphasised on more than one occasion, his critique was primarily epistemological rather than ethico-political in focus, founded upon his distinctions between the 'thought-concrete' and the

⁶ Althusser 1969, p. 227. For accounts of the theoretico-political conjuncture of Althusser's intervention and its aftermath in the 'Humanist Controversy' of 1966 in the PCF, see Elliott 2006 [1987], Goshgarian 2003 and Lewis 2007.

⁷ Althusser 1969, p. 227.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Althusser 1969, p. 228.

¹⁰ Thompson 1978.

‘real-concrete’, science and ideology, genuine ‘knowledge’ and mere ‘recognition’. Rather than denying the (ideological) efficacy of forms of humanism, Althusser’s intervention defined them as ideology precisely in order better to understand their political functioning, as the spiritual supplements to social relations that negated the ‘human’ in practice.¹¹ Theoretical anti-humanism in a practically anti-humanist present, that is, was founded on the presupposition that only an accurate knowledge of the conditions that produced humanism as a ‘necessary’ ideology in bourgeois society could help to overcome it and thus open the way to a ‘*practical* humanism of the future’.¹² Althusser himself argued that

strictly in respect to theory, therefore, one can and must speak openly of *Marx’s theoretical anti-humanism*, and see in this *theoretical anti-humanism* the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.¹³

The political conjuncture did not prove hospitable to such distinctions or theoretical gambits. The so-called ‘Humanist Controversy’ of 1966–7 in the French Communist Party provoked by this critique ended in an unmitigated political defeat for the Althusserian offensive. Nevertheless, Althusser remained undeterred, at least in the realm of theory. Throughout the later 1960s and beyond, he intensified his attack on the modern philosophical tradition’s con-

¹¹ Gerratana later voiced the obvious objection to this epistemological gambit: ‘As much as one can think that the theories of the dissolution of the subject are more effect than cause of the progressive practical destruction of the person induced by real processes, it shouldn’t be assumed that adding theoretical destruction is the best way to comprehend this reality’ (Gerratana 1997, p. 137).

¹² Elliott 2006, p. 348.

¹³ Althusser 1969, p. 229. Althusser emphasised the epistemological focus of his critique even more strongly in his response to critics at the time of the humanist controversy: ‘The “notion of man” was an “epistemological obstacle” to the science of history. In his mature works, Marx starts out from the abstract, and says so. This does not mean that, for Marx, men, individuals, and their subjectivity have been expunged from real history. It means that the notions of Man, etc., have been expunged from theory, for, in theory, no-one has yet, to my knowledge, met a flesh-and-blood man, only the notion of man. Far from being able to found and serve theory, these ideological notions have only one effect: they foreclose theory. These notions of Theoretical Humanism have been eliminated from Marx’s scientific theory, and we have every right to eliminate them, root and branch—for the simple reason that they act only as “epistemological obstacles” there’ (Althusser 2003, pp. 264–5).

cepts of subjectivity, authorship and intentionality, producing perhaps the most uncompromising position in a season of so-called structuralist and post-structuralist anti-humanisms. The result was a liquidation of the autonomy of the category of the subject, now revealed as a function of the interpellation of the individual by the state's ideological apparatuses, and the expunging of the subject's spiritual 'comrades-in-arms', 'origin' and 'goal', from the historical process.

9.1.1. A return of the subject?

In terms of the political efficacy assigned to theory, however, something decisive had changed. The explanatory role that had been assigned to theoretical as opposed to ideological concepts in the first phase of his work fell prey to a charge of 'theoreticism', a critique that Althusser himself in large part accepted. For the theoretical structure mapped out in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*, 'it is the bearers of theory who make history', Althusser ironically noted in a period of self-critique.¹⁴ In other words, Althusser accepted his critics' objections that, having denied the status of the concept of the subject to human nature or an essence of man, he had transferred its active dimensions onto theory itself, thereby restoring a transcendental subject of history. The claims of theory to provide 'knowledge' rather than mere 'recognition' of a given historical situation were progressively abandoned. From the deterministic 'three worlds' analysis proposed in *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'* ('supra-phenomenal' theory accessed and transformed the 'phenomenal' world of ideology, which was determined by the 'noumenal' 'Real'), Althusser came to endorse a conception of the world given in its contingency, almost as a 'plane of immanence', in the terminology of his contemporary Deleuze. By the time of the radical nominalism of the 'philosophy of the encounter', it is arguable whether any role is left to philosophy other than that of 'recognising' the flux of historical events without origins or ends. Extreme theoreticism gives way to its opposite, the redundancy of theory as anything more than description. In its turn, this arguably leads to the return of a very peculiar 'subject', complemented by its own distinctive 'objects'. Just as in his early works, in the late

¹⁴ Cf. Goshgarian 2003, pp. xiv–xv. On Althusser's theoreticism more generally, cf. Callinicos 1976.

Althusser's meditations on the singularity of any given conjuncture it is not 'men' who are the authors of initiatives or actions; but theory no longer occupies the post of (retrospective) totalisation in those later works. Rather, it is the conjuncture itself, conceived as an 'encounter' produced by a 'swerve', that stands over against 'men' as the origin of 'all Meaning and all reason'. As there is nothing beyond the encounter, it is *immediately* present to itself in its totality. The attributes of transparency, creativity and immediate self-consciousness traditionally ascribed to the 'subject', that is, are surreptitiously transferred now not to theory but to the conjuncture, conceived in a passive sense simply as 'alles, was der Fall ist'.¹⁵ Gramsci would have recognised in such a formulation the symptoms of a political defeat, translated into a theoretical register. If this is the case, then the late Althusser would have 'spontaneously rediscovered' yet again the displaced creative 'essence' that had haunted both his youthful work and even his on-going break with himself.

9.1.2. The union of humanism and historicism

In the meantime, however, *Reading 'Capital'* (also published in 1965) confidently continued the anti-humanist line of attack and tied it to that work's simultaneous anti-historicist offensive. Althusser conceded that a 'non-historicist humanism is perfectly conceivable, as is a non-humanist historicism' (the latter position was ascribed to Colletti).¹⁶ However, he insisted that 'the union of humanism and historicism represents the gravest temptation, for it procures the greatest theoretical advantages, at least in appearance'.¹⁷ In particular, it opened the way for the 'underhand reduction' that implicitly posited a humanist problematic not only in Marx's early works, but also at the very heart of the conceptual structure of the *magnum opus* of his maturity. This reduction, Althusser argued,

depends on something 'obvious': is not history a 'human' phenomenon through and through, and did not Marx, quoting Vico, declare that men can know it since they have '*made*' all of it? But this 'obviousness' depends on

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1922, pp. 30–1. Althusser himself approvingly quotes Wittgenstein's *bon mot*, alongside Heidegger's *es gibt*, as a precursor of his philosophy of the encounter (Althusser 2006, p. 190).

¹⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

a remarkable presupposition: that the 'actors' of history are the authors of its text, the subjects of its production. But this presupposition too has all the force of the 'obvious', since, as opposed to what the theatre suggests, concrete men are, in history, the actors of roles of which they are the authors, too. Once the stage-director has been spirited away, the actor-author becomes the twin-brother of Aristotle's old dream: the doctor-who-cures-himself; and the *relations of production*, although they are the real stage-directors of history, are reduced to mere *human relations*. [...] Once this human nature has been endowed with the qualities of 'concrete' historicity, it becomes possible to avoid the abstraction and fixity of theological or ethical anthropologies and to join Marx in the very heart of his lair: historical materialism. This human nature will therefore be conceived as something produced by history, and changing with it, while man changes, as even the Philosophers of the Enlightenment intended, with the revolutions of his own history, and is affected by the social products of his objective history even in his most intimate faculties (seeing, hearing, memory, reason, etc). [...] History then becomes the transformation of a human nature, which remains the real subject of the history which transforms it. As a result, history has been introduced into human nature, making men the contemporaries of the historical effects whose subjects they are, but—and this is absolutely decisive—the relations of production, political and ideological social relations, have been reduced to historicized '*human relations*', i.e., to inter-human, inter-subjective relations. This is the favourite terrain of historicist humanism. And what is its great advantage? The fact that Marx is restored to the stream of an ideology much older than himself.¹⁸

The evidence that Althusser mustered in order to restore Gramsci to the stream of an ideology much 'younger' than him was, to say the least, scant. He did not pause to consider whether Gramsci, similarly to Colletti if for different reasons, might ultimately refuse an historicised human nature as the essence of history,¹⁹ or whether Gramsci's absolute historicism might imply a non-contemporaneity that makes the 'transparency' of the present to consciousness a sign of the ideological *par excellence*.²⁰ Rather, he adumbrated a series of

¹⁸ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 139–40.

¹⁹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 139.

²⁰ Cf. Chapter Seven.

'associations', some more free than others: Gramsci had declared that Marxism was simultaneously an 'absolute historicism' and 'absolute humanism of history';²¹ the *Prison Notebooks* had also used the term 'historical relation' to refer to a central category of Marxist theory such as the superstructure;²² caught up in the ferment of the post-World-War I revolutionary revolt, Gramsci, now permanently consigned to a current of ultra-leftism (from which he had soon departed, moving towards a more 'mature' politics of the united front), had fallen into a politicism that mistook ideological for theoretical categories, rejecting 'absolutely anything, *even in theory*, which might defer or stifle this urgent appeal to the historical responsibility of the real men hurled into the revolution';²³ curiously—and, here, the plot thickened—there seemed to be similarities between Gramsci's theory of 'organic intellectuals' and Sartre's 'ideologists',²⁴ just as there were similarities between the militancy of Sartre's historicist humanism's 'exaltation of human freedom' and Gramsci's famed valorisation of the agency of the Bolsheviks;²⁵ finally, in his astounding declaration that 'Gramsci even gives Sartre's distinction between philosophy and history in so many words',²⁶ Althusser revealed the extent to which he was writing the history of philosophy in the '*future anterior*', which he himself had elsewhere condemned as a pre-eminently 'Hegelian' operation.²⁷

Despite such distant family resemblances and dubious evidence, Althusser still felt authorised to assimilate Gramsci's 'absolute humanism of history' to the same problematic by which he felt assailed in his own very different conjuncture. Given that such 'populist humanist' notions had played just as significant a role in the PCI's post-World-War II diffusion of Gramsci's thought as the idea that he was the Communist inheritor of the Italian intellectuals' traditional 'historicism', it is not surprising that this critique gained an easy and uncontentious acceptance. From that point onwards, the lines were drawn between, on the one hand, the supposed 'structuralism' of Althusserian theoretical anti-humanism and, on the other, the 'humanism' of Gramscianism's 'optimism of the will'. Even though now more often valorised than

²¹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 127.

²² Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 133.

²³ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 140.

²⁴ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 136.

²⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 142.

²⁶ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 136.

²⁷ Althusser 1969, p. 54.

condemned, Gramsci's 'absolute humanism of history' is still widely implicitly regarded as corresponding to the description proposed by *Reading 'Capital'*. Given the disrepute into which that latter work's 'determinism' has fallen, condemnation has morphed into praise, as a 'humanist' Gramsci can now be presented as a viable alternative to the misadventures of Theory.

9.1.3. An 'ensemble of historically determined social relations'

Gramsci did indeed counterpose in 1917 the revolutionary will of the Bolsheviks to the mechanistic determinism in terms of which *Capital* had sometimes been read in the Second International. In the *Prison Notebooks*, he proposes to place the 'will' at the basis of philosophy and defines 'human nature' as the 'complex of social relations' or even 'history'.²⁸ Read out of context, these passages would appear to provide more than sufficient arguments for Althusser's critique, reinforcing the 'humanist' reading of Gramsci that is hegemonic in contemporary (anti-theoretical humanist) debates. Yet a closer reading of the *Prison Notebooks* is enough to assure the doubtful reader that the positions criticised by Althusser are not to be found in those pages. In fact, Gramsci directly refutes the theoretical presuppositions of any naïve, 'ideologically humanist' problematic according to which 'man in general' or the 'human essence', as 'conscious-being [*Bewusstsein*]' raised above being [*Sein*], constitutes the true subject, the author, not only of its own existence but of history in its totality. Gramsci affirms that, for the philosophy of praxis,

'Man in general' is negated and all dogmatically 'unitary' concepts are spurned and destroyed as expressions of the concept of 'man in general' or of 'human nature' immanent in every man.²⁹

Here, he follows his translation of the sixth of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, according to which

the human essence is no abstraction inherent to the single individual [*dem einzelnen Individuum inwohnendes Abstraktum*]. In its actuality [*Wirklichkeit*], it is the ensemble of social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter into a criticism of this actual [*wirklichen*] essence, is therefore compelled: 1. To abstract

²⁸ Q 7, §35; *SPN*, p. 355.

²⁹ Q 4, §45.

from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something for itself and to presuppose an abstract—*isolated*—human individual. 2. Essence can therefore only be comprehended as ‘genus’, as an internal, dumb generality [*Allgemeinheit*] that *naturally* unites the many individuals.³⁰

Such was the impact of this passage upon Gramsci that he even goes so far as to designate this form of ‘theoretical anti-humanism *avant la lettre*’ as the novel feature introduced by Marx into the Western philosophical tradition.

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and history is the demonstration that there is no abstract ‘human nature’, fixed and immobile (a concept derived from religious thought and from transcendentalism) but that human nature is the ensemble of historically determined social relations; that is, it is a historical fact which can be ascertained, within certain limits, by the methods of philology and criticism.³¹

As we have seen in previous chapters, Gramsci sets this element of Marx’s critique of Feuerbach to work on various terrains.³² ‘Essentially’, the individual is incoherently composed, or ‘bizarrely “composite”’.³³ The individual is not defined as a subject with a unitary and unifying essence, but as a ‘living archaeological site’ in which different levels of historical experience are ‘at work’.³⁴ Furthermore, this ‘walking anachronism’ finds itself in a present that is itself divided between different times and, crucially, different class hegemonic projects. For Gramsci, therefore, the ‘human’ is not to be explained rationally merely as an ensemble of historically determined social relations, but rather, as an ensemble of historical relations of *class struggle*. These social relations, rather than ‘human relations’ founded upon an interiority-becoming-intersubjectivity, are instead conceived externally, as a *Kampfplatz* of competing hegemonies or relations of leadership that are ultimately determined by the ‘necessity’ imposed by the economic organisation of a social formation and not the ‘freedom’ of an ‘arbitrary’ individual or even collective ‘consciousness’. They impact upon the ‘subject’ as the preconditions of its social activity and are in turn interiorised by it as its own particular ‘subjective’ modes of being-

³⁰ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 4.

³¹ *Q* 13, §20; *SPN*, p. 133.

³² Cf. Sections 7.3.1. and 8.6.5.

³³ *Q* 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 324.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

in-this-particular-world. Only at this point, as a result of a complex series of mediations, can we begin to talk of a 'subject' or 'human essence', which nevertheless remains a type of heuristic shorthand for the processes it describes. Thus Gramsci could rhetorically ask in a discussion of Feuerbach,

is the 'human' a starting-point or a point of arrival, as a concept and as a unitary fact? Or might not the whole attempt, in so far as it posits the human as a starting-point, be a 'theological' or 'metaphysical' residue? [...] That 'human nature' is the 'complex of social relations' is the most satisfactory answer, because it includes the idea of becoming; man 'becomes', he changes continuously with the changing of social relations; and because it denies 'man in general'; indeed, social relations are expressed by various groups of men which each presuppose the others and whose unity is dialectical, not formal.³⁵

Far from presupposing the classical (Cartesian) theory of the subject, the *Prison Notebooks* in fact continually interrogate the political presuppositions of such a conception. Thus, as we have seen, Gramsci's theory of the superstructures is intended precisely to provide a rational and political explanation of the subjective conception of the world, which in its speculative form can be nothing more than a 'philosophical novel [*romanzo*]'.³⁶ The subjectivist conception of the world ascribes to consciousness capacities of direction and decision that are in fact only realised in dialectical relations between determinate class interests.

Similarly, Gramsci's political critique of the origins of 'objectivism' (as an expression of subalternity) carries the implicit corollary that he does not conceive of classes as 'subjects' (which would be merely the inversion of subalternity, perpetuating it in its speculative negation) in the sense of centres of initiative and decision that seek to satisfy their desires by means of competition with other class-subjects for control of a world of 'objects'. In this, there is an important difference between Gramsci's notion of class relationality and, for example, Lukács's slightly earlier attempt, in the mixture of enthusiasm and confusion of a post-World-War I leftism fallen onto harder times, to deploy the traditional modern philosophical vocabulary to describe the proletariat as the simultaneous 'subject' and 'object' of history. Rather, following the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Gramsci characterises the formation of 'fundamental' social

³⁵ Q 7, §35; SPN, p. 355.

³⁶ Q 11, §17; SPN, p. 444.

groups as ensembles of historically determined social relations that emerge, in the first instance, from the interests imposed by the world of production (relations of production) and which are then modified, 'molecularly', in the struggle to impose them upon society as a whole in hegemonic relations between and within classes. In turn, these relations of production are not reduced to merely 'human relations', and not only because Gramsci has already dispensed with a fixed notion of a human essence or because he refuses subject/object dichotomies as a speculative comprehension of a *practical* relation of activity and passivity. Rather, they are grasped as 'relations of force' between different class interests and projects whose conflictual dynamic is determinant; that is, it is their dialectical opposition and interpenetration that is constitutive, rather than any pre-given interiority or subjectivity that then enters into (contractual) relations with its exterior, or with other 'interiorities' or subjectivities (in truth, a classic tenet of the liberal conception criticised so thoroughly in the *Prison Notebooks*, in both its free-market and syndicalist versions).³⁷ With this line of reasoning, we could not be further away from any 'ideologically humanist' problematic and its faith in an originary and redemptive human subject; but, equally, given Gramsci's historicist emphasis upon the formation and modification of relations of force and their political expression as theory, we could not be further away from a merely 'theoretical' anti-humanism that denies transparency to the human essence in order to claim a panoptical perspective for itself as the true subject of history.

9.1.4. Subject or *persona*?

In fact, the concept of the 'subject', declined in the classical terms of introspection/self-consciousness/intentionality/authorship, is noticeable in the *Prison Notebooks* by its almost complete absence. The term appears only fifteen times in over 2,000 pages; in the majority of cases, Gramsci transcribes it as a part of a quotation from another writer or is stimulated to use it by the vocabulary of the writer under discussion.³⁸ As Gerratana has pointed out, Gramsci's anal-

³⁷ On this element of the *Prison Notebooks*, cf. Losurdo 1997.

³⁸ Cf. e.g. Q 4, §41: 'For historical materialism you cannot separate thought from being, man from nature, activity (history) from matter, the subject from the object'. Q 8, §177: 'What does "objective" mean? Won't it mean "humanly objective" and will it not be thus also *humanly* "subjective"? The *objective* would then be the *universal subjective*,

yses operate with the much older and more ambivalent category of the 'person [*la persona*]', or more precisely, a particular reformulation of this category that is not easily assimilable to the modern (epistemologically founded) discourses of the knowing subject that have often subsumed the older category. This reformulation can be regarded as Gramsci's 'anti-subjectivist' historicist explanation of the category of the subject, in keeping with his insistence that the subjective/objective dichotomy needs to be rationally deciphered in terms of praxis.

Originating through a transposition of theatrical terminology to the ethical-political field, the Latin concept of the *persona* ('mask' or 'character' in a dramatic play) was popularised by Stoicism in order to describe the various roles 'played' by any one individual in the course of social life. It was then adopted in the early Church in order to translate debates originally conducted in Greek regarding the substantial Trinitarian nature of the divinity, giving rise to centuries of theological disputes; via a complicated history of reception and translation, this tradition would eventually develop into one of Kant's formulations of his categorical imperative. *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals* presents the person as an 'end' in itself, as opposed to a 'means' or 'thing' for something else, insofar as Reason determines its *Träger* to be an end in itself.³⁹ The discourse of the person was thus closely integrated with that of the subject via their anchoring in an internalisation of reason as definitive of the human essence.

Another tradition, however, continued the Stoic focus upon social relationality and the determination of the person by their location upon the 'stage of the world'. It is from this tradition that the concept of a 'juridical person' derives, perhaps most famously formulated by Hobbes in terms of a distinction between the 'natural' and 'artificial' person. Just as an actor can play different roles at different times, so any individual 'represents', in the form of a 'person', numerous social roles. For Hobbes, the Shakespearean stage on which 'all the men and women are merely players', in their time playing many parts,

that is: the subject knows objectively insofar as knowledge is real for the entire human species *historically* unified in a unitary cultural system. The struggle for objectivity would thus be the struggle for the cultural unification of the human species; the process of this unification would be the process of objectification of the subject, who becomes increasingly a concrete universal, historically concrete'.

³⁹ Cf. Kant 1998.

is, of course, the modern representative state.⁴⁰ For this tradition, the person is a category of analysis less focused upon the interiority of a consciousness as constitutive of identity, than with the imposition (and passive or active acceptance) of an 'exterior' network of social relations that create the terrain of social action and therefore social identity.

9.1.5. The Gramscian 'person'

The theory of the person that is implicitly deployed and developed in the *Prison Notebooks* demonstrates a closer affiliation to the politico-juridical tradition of reflection, though not without providing an ethico-political explanation of the unity posited by the theologically inflected concept. As we have seen, Gramsci posits the non-identity of the individual in a series of temporal dislocations that they (or rather, more often, the juridico-political apparatus) only sometimes manage to unify in an uneasy *modus vivendi*. He emphasises the various social roles played by any particular individual, in an ensemble of social roles, as related but distinct 'persons'. Central to these reflections is the notion of 'molecular' transformations of what could be described as the 'composite body' of a person, modifying the composition or relations of force that constitute it.⁴¹ As Gerratana comments,

⁴⁰ Cf. Hobbes 1968, pp. 217–22 in particular (Chapter 16 of *Leviathan*, 'Of Persons, Authors and Things Personated').

⁴¹ As we have seen, Gramsci develops his theory of molecular transformations, in the first instance, on the political terrain, particularly in relation to absorption of elements of one group by another in the *trasformismo* he saw in the passive revolution of post-Risorgimento Italy (cf. Q 8, §36). Cf. also the following: 'One may apply to the concept of passive revolution (documenting it from the Italian *Risorgimento*) the interpretative criterion of molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes' (Q 15, §11; SPN, p. 109). He also uses the term in a series of other contexts to describe processes of slow but steady transformation that eventually issue in a dialectical conversion of quantitative into qualitative change, in relation to transformations of language in particular (cf. Q 6, §62; Gramsci 1985, pp. 119–21; Q 6, §71; Gramsci 1985, pp. 176–8; Q 29, §3; Gramsci 1985, pp. 183–4). His application of this theme to the study of the person is thus a paradigmatic case of what I referred to in the previous chapter as the strategy of an 'anti-Platonist Platonic allegory': the individual is grasped in terms of the ensemble of social relations of which it is a condensation (thus the negation of any concept of an essence or soul), rather than, as in the *Republic*, presented as the paradigm for the comprehension of that which determines it.

the concept of person, with the theory of 'molecular' transformations of the person, remains at the centre of the anti-moralistic conception of Gramsci. Not ontological presupposition, but result of a process of moral self-creation, implicit in the ethical reality of an active living together [*convivenza*], the person is a perishable subject, and as such can be destroyed, saved or defended.⁴²

Implicit throughout his discussions of the capacities of individuals to act in a world of necessity, the theme is at certain moments explicitly confronted by Gramsci, both in terms of his personal experience of prison and the dislocations and disaggregation of a previously given social identity, and as material for theoretical elaboration. In a letter to Julia on 19 November 1928, he wrote the following formulations.

When I see men who have been in jail for five, right, ten years act and speak, and I observe the psychic deformations inflicted on them, I truly shudder and wonder about the outlook for my own future. I believe that the others too have thought (not all of them but at least some) that they would not allow themselves to be overwhelmed and instead, without even being aware of it, the process is so molecular and slow, one day they find themselves changed and do not know it, cannot judge it because they are changed so completely. Certainly, I will resist. But, for example, I realise that I am no longer able to laugh at myself, as in the past, and this is serious.⁴³

Gramsci indeed resisted, for more than ten years. The brutalisation of prison life, however, remained a disquieting preoccupation, as isolation from party comrades, friends and wife threatened to wreak havoc on his sense of perspective. In a very real sense, he found himself living out the tragedy of Cavalcanti, consigned to suffer the 'non-presence of the present' (a metaphor that had more than one significance for the doubly incarcerated Gramsci). On 6 March 1933, following a prison visit by Tania, he returned to the theme of a 'slow' and 'molecular' process of transformation. He asked her to imagine

a shipwreck and that a certain number of persons take refuge in a large boat to save themselves without knowing where, when, and after what vicissitudes

⁴² Gerratana 1997, p. 137.

⁴³ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 233.

they will actually be saved. Before the shipwreck, as is quite natural, not one of the future victims thought he would become... the victim of a shipwreck and therefore imagined even less that he would be driven to commit the acts that victims of shipwreck under certain conditions may commit, for example, the act of becoming... anthropophagous. Each one of them, if questioned point-blank about what he would do faced by the alternative of dying or becoming cannibalistic, would have answered in the utmost good faith that given the alternative, he would certainly choose to die. The shipwreck occurs, the rush to the lifeboat etc. A few days later, when the food was given out, the idea of cannibalism presents itself in a different light until at a certain point, a certain number of those particular people become cannibalistic. But are they in reality the same people?⁴⁴

There is a striking similarity between the terms in which Gramsci poses the problem of the continuity of a person's identity and one of the most curious Scholia of Spinoza's *Ethics*. 'It sometimes happens', Spinoza writes,

that a man undergoes such changes, that I should hardly call him the same. As I have heard tell of a certain Spanish poet, who had been seized with sickness, and though he recovered therefrom yet remained so oblivious of his past life, that he would not believe the plays and tragedies he had written to be his own: indeed, he might have been taken for a grown-up child, if he had also forgotten his native tongue. If this instance seems incredible, what shall we say of infants? A man of ripe age deems their nature so unlike his own, that he can only be persuaded that he too has been an infant by the analogy of other men. However, I prefer to leave such questions undiscussed, lest I should give ground to the superstitious for raising new issues.⁴⁵

Gramsci shares Spinoza's presuppositions of the individual as a composition of various elements in a continual process of recomposition and/or decomposition which, under certain pressures, may not be able to maintain itself in its being.⁴⁶ The difference between their images lies in Gramsci's adoption of a

⁴⁴ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 278.

⁴⁵ EIVP39Sch.

⁴⁶ As Macherey had commented regarding (the absence of) Spinoza's theory of the 'subject', 'the individual or subject does not exist by itself, in the irreducible simplicity

perspective *more historico* rather than *geometrico*. For the *Ethics*, such molecular transformations are comprehended *sub specie aeternitatis*, as re-articulations of already given elements or modifications within the one substance. For the *Prison Notebooks*, on the other hand, such molecular changes should be attributed to the substantive and aggregative nature of historical experience, namely, the fact that a being or idea may possess full being or be 'true' in one given epoch but not in another because historical experience has introduced qualitatively new elements that negate or, more often, modify the relations of force in which it is inscribed. Spinoza breaks off his reflections out of fear of giving succour to the superstitious i.e. those who see the continuity of an individual despite regular transformations as evidence of a determining originary form, or the soul; Gramsci confronts the challenge and explains that such continuity is in fact a function of one of the primary formative elements of class society, namely, the juridico-political apparatus that continues to 'interpellate' the individual, to use Althusser's terminology, regardless of and sometimes precisely by means of extensive molecular transformations.

Between the two moments, that in which the alternative [of cannibalism] presented itself as a purely theoretical hypothesis and that in which the alternative presents itself with all the force of immediate necessity, there has been a process of 'molecular' transformation, rapid though it may have been, due to which the people of before no longer are the people of afterward, and one can no longer say except from the point of view of the State records office and the law (which on the other hand are respectable points of view that have their own importance) that they are the same people.⁴⁷

The analysis of such juridical unification does not give solace to the superstitious; rather, it pursues them into their secular lair and explains their claims to unity to be a function of the state. Gramsci proceeds to elaborate his theory of the person not in terms of a subject with privileged access to its own interiority, but rather, in terms of an 'internalisation' within the composite body of the person of the mode of 'exterior' observation proper to the regulating techniques of the juridical apparatus. There is a 'doubling' of the

of a unique and eternal being, but is rather composed by the encounter of singular beings that assemble conjuncturally in it [...] but without this assemblage presupposing any privileged relation' (Macherey 1979, p. 216).

⁴⁷ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 278–9.

personality, as different ‘times’ of its development—that is, the different social roles it embodies—confront each other in the ‘eternity’ of a subject-function of the state.

The most serious thing is that in these cases there is a split in the personality; one part of it observes the process, the other suffers it, but the observing part (as long as this part exists there is self-control and the possibility of recovery) senses the precariousness of its position, that is, it foresees that it will reach a point at which its function will disappear, that is, there will no longer be any self-control and the entire personality will be swallowed by a new ‘individual’ who has impulses, initiatives, ways of thinking different from the previous ones.⁴⁸

The day after this letter, on 7 March 1933, Gramsci suffered a physical collapse, though without undergoing the psychic degeneration he had feared. His meditations on molecular transformations of the person in the *Prison Notebooks* remained incomplete, implicitly rather than explicitly developed: ‘like many Gramscian theories, also this theory of the person is more highlighted than developed fully’.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, it does undergo at least one further development. In the same period as his letter to Tania (or presumably, slightly after) he penned one of the few notes in the *Prison Notebooks* in which he comes close to a meditation on his personal suffering (a genre otherwise, perhaps surprisingly, noticeable in its absence). Once again, he begins from the theme of cannibalism as symbolic of larger moral dilemmas. As in the letter, but in a more direct form, Gramsci confronts the themes of the struggle for coherence and responsibility of the person, but now seeks to place his reflections in a broader political context.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 279.

⁴⁹ Gerratana 1997, p. 138.

⁵⁰ I thus disagree with Gerratana’s analysis of the transition between these passages. He argues that Gramsci abandons the seemingly more ‘Ciceronian-Hobbesian’ notion of a doubling of personality suggested in his letter and, in the later ‘Autobiographical notes’ in the *Prison Notebooks*, analyses the ‘natural person’ in terms closer to those of Kant and the concept in the Christian tradition (Gerratana 1997, p. 134) (though without ‘the moralistic suggestions of Kantian formalism’ (Gerratana 1997, p. 138)). Confronted by a ‘“terroristic” element’ threatening the possibility of personal coherence, Gramsci searched for ‘all the rational means useful for a counterattack, including a certain re-evaluation of the traditional concept of the person’ as a rational unity (Gerratana 1997, p. 137). I would suggest, rather, that the relative lack of emphasis that Gramsci places on the theme of the decomposition of one personality and emergence of another in the

Such is its singularity in the *Prison Notebooks*, as testimony to 'a lived act of the moral research of our times',⁵¹ that it deserves to be quoted in full:

Autobiographical notes. How I began to use greater indulgence in judging the catastrophes afflicting character. Through experience of the process by which such catastrophes come about. No leniency towards those who 'precipitately' carry out an act contrary to their principles, where precipitately is meant in the sense of not having thought that to stand firm on certain principles would cause suffering and not having foreseen this. Those who, when suddenly faced with suffering, change their attitude, either without first having suffered or when the pain has just begun, deserve no leniency. But the question presents itself in complex guises. It is strange that normally one is less indulgent toward 'molecular' changes than towards sudden ones. Now the most dangerous movement is that at the 'molecular' level since, while it demonstrates the subject's will to resist, it allows one (whoever reflects on such things) 'to glimpse' a progressive change in moral personality which at a certain point stops being quantitative and becomes qualitative; in other words one is no longer really dealing with the same person but with two people. (It is understood that 'indulgence' means no more than not adopting a morally philistine position, not at all that one should not take the change [into account] or that it should not be subject to sanction; the absence of sanction would mean 'glorification' or at least 'indifference' to the fact, thus not allowing one to distinguish between necessity and non-necessity, *force majeure* and cowardice). The principle has developed that the captain must not abandon ship until the last, when all others have been saved; some even go as far as claiming that he 'must' go down with the ship. These assertions are less irrational than they may seem. Certainly it is not excluded that there is anything wrong in the captain saving himself first. But if this observation were to become a principle, what guarantee would there be that the captain had done everything possible: 1) to avoid the shipwreck; 2) to ensure that everything had been done in the event of a shipwreck to reduce damage

note in the *Prison Notebooks* is due to his different focus: while personal fears mark his letter to Tania, this note focuses upon the political question of the 'moral terrorism' (i.e. the molecular decompositions of passive revolution) that was investing Italian (and more generally European) society at the time: the 'biopolitics' of Fascism.

⁵¹ Gerratana 1997, p. 129. The phrase is originally from Togliatti.

to persons and things to the minimum? (After all, damage to things means future damage to people.) Only the principle, which has acquired an 'absolute' nature, that in the case of a shipwreck the captain is the last to abandon ship or must even go down with it, gives this guarantee without which the collective life is impossible, that is, no one would take on commitments or act, leaving their own personal security to others. Modern life is to a great extent made up of these states of mind or 'beliefs' that are as strong as material facts. To return to the argument, sanction of these changes is a political, not a moral, fact and depends not on a moral judgement but on one of 'necessity' for the future, in the sense that if one did not behave in a certain way, greater damage could come about: in politics it is just to commit a small 'injustice' in order to avoid a greater one, etc. I say that who is changed 'molecularly' (where this is understood to be by *force majeure*) is 'morally' more justifiable than who changes suddenly, although one usually reasons differently. One hears it said: 'he resisted for five years, why not six? He could have resisted another year and come out triumphant'. This, however, is a case of the benefit of hindsight, because in the fifth year the subject did not know that 'only' another year's suffering lay in store. But, apart from this, the truth is that the person of the fifth year is not the same as in the fourth, the third, the second, the first etc; he is a new personality, completely new, in which the years that have passed have in fact demolished the moral braking system, the forces of resistance that characterised the man of the first year. A typical example is that of cannibalism. One may say that, at the current level attained by civilisation, cannibalism is so repugnant that a normal person is to be believed when they say that faced with the choice, they would kill themselves. In reality, the same person, if faced with exactly the choice 'be a cannibal or kill yourself' would no longer reason like this, because there would have come about such changes in the self that 'killing oneself' would no longer present itself as a necessary alternative: those people would become cannibals without giving suicide the slightest thought. If Tizio,⁵² in the fullness of his physical and moral strength, is put to the test, there is a probability that he would kill himself (after persuading himself that it was not a comedy but a real thing, a serious alternative, that he was faced with); but this probability no longer exists

⁵² 'Tizio, Caio and Sempronio' is the Italian equivalent of the English idiomatic phrase 'Tom, Dick and Harry'; it is originally derived from juridical terminology.

(or at least is greatly diminished) if Tizio is faced with the choice, after having undergone a molecular process, in which his physical and moral strength has been destroyed, etc. So it is that we see normally peaceful people give vent to unexpected outbursts of anger and ferocity. There is, in actual fact, nothing unexpected about it: there has been an 'invisible' [and molecular] process in which the moral strength that made them 'peaceful' has been dissolved. This fact, relating to the individual, may be considered collective (in which case one speaks of 'the last straw' etc.). The drama of such people consists in this: Tizio foresees the process of destruction, in other words, he foresees that he will become... a cannibal and thinks that, should this happen, at a certain point [of the process] I will kill myself. But what will this point be? In reality everyone trusts to their own strength and hopes for new cases that will get them out of the given dilemma. And so it comes about that (save for exceptions) the majority of people find themselves with the process of transformation fully underway beyond that point at which their forces are still able to react, albeit according to the alternative of suicide. This fact is to be studied in its current manifestations. Not that the fact has not occurred in the past, but it is certain that in the present it has taken on a special and... a voluntary form. That is to say that today one counts on this happening and the event is systematically prepared, which didn't happen in the past (where systematically means however 'en masse', without of course excluding particular 'attention' paid to individuals). Without doubt an element has crept in today, an element that used not to exist in the past, a 'terroristic' element, an element of material and even moral terrorism, which cannot simply be disregarded. This makes yet more serious the responsibility of those who, although perfectly able, have not—because of inexperience, negligence or even their own perverse will—put a stop to certain matters. [Against this antimoralistic way of seeing things there is the falsely heroic, rhetorical, phrase-mongering conception, against which one cannot fight too hard.].⁵³

⁵³ Q 15, §9; *FSPN*, pp. lxxxiv–lxxxvii.

9.2. Humanism, hegemony and intellectuals

These themes were not, however, the only or even main reason why Gramsci proposed that the philosophy of praxis was an ‘absolute humanism of history’. With the term ‘humanism’, Gramsci was not referring primarily to an ideological or philosophical problematic, but rather, a philosophico-political tendency and, in particular, its continuing influence on the intellectuals of the Western-European social formations. ‘An absolute humanism of history’, that is, functions as a ‘codeword’ for Gramsci’s researches into the question of the intellectuals, viewed in the perspective of the legacy of Renaissance humanism. Gramsci recognised that the humanism of the Italian Renaissance had exerted and continued to produce effects that had assimilated but went well beyond a theory of the subject or human nature. It constituted in a very real sense a ‘conception of the world’ that needed to be critically confronted and practically refuted. Following the sense in which Gramsci employed the adjective in relation to ‘historicism’ and ‘worldliness/immanence’, ‘absolute’ humanism does not refer to an intensification or ‘truth’ of this tradition. Rather, it signals a relationship of both inheritance and superannuation, or resolution of immanent contradictions; in short, an *Aufhebung* of the humanist tradition prior to the historical epoch initiated by Marx. As we have already briefly seen and will analyse more closely in this chapter, an historical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of Renaissance humanism plays an important role in Gramsci’s research into the formation of the creative popular spirit in his national context. This analysis, however, is conducted within a more expansive optic that provides his reflections on humanism with their integral meaning: namely, a study of the role of intellectuals in the bourgeois integral state and in particular, the construction of civil and political hegemony. In its turn, these analyses in a negative critical register give way to a positive alternative: the elaboration of the function of intellectuals and the specific type of intellectual practice adequate to the construction of proletarian hegemony. As Francioni notes, ‘the question of hegemony and that of the intellectuals are, in a strict sense, indissoluble’.⁵⁴ It is along this line that we must trace Gramsci’s elaboration of the philosophy of praxis as an ‘absolute humanism of history’.

⁵⁴ Francioni 1984, p. 161.

9.2.1. Marxism and the intellectuals

It has often been noted that the theme of the 'intellectuals' occupies a prominent place in Gramsci's thought, one of the main Ariadne's threads by means of which the wary reader can chart his or her way through the *Prison Notebooks*. Indeed, the success of categories such as the 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectual, which have now entered into everyday intellectual currency with meanings sometimes quite different from those Gramsci originally ascribed to them, can be taken as an index of Gramsci's importance for this theme of research, within and beyond the bounds of Marxism strictly conceived. This is perhaps nowhere more so the case than for recent tendencies that have gone by way of a superannuation of Gramsci's categories in favour of others such as the 'specific intellectual', associated with Deleuze and Foucault, in order then to place the Marxist tradition *tout court* in question.⁵⁵ For they correctly recognised that Gramsci is the Marxist theorist *par excellence* of the intellectuals, and that Marxism's contribution to this field of research in large parts rests with Gramsci. Marx and Engels sketched out perspectives for a theory of the social position and efficacy of intellectuals with their analysis of the historical emergence of the division of labour and their critique of the deleterious role of 'ideologists' as (conscious or unconscious) defenders of the status quo (most notably, in the *German Ideology*). The *Communist Manifesto* went on to note the class transition of certain types of intellectuals in periods of revolutionary upheaval. However, writing before the Dreyfus affair in which the term 'intellectual' was established for the first time as a key word of modern political discourse, Marx and Engels did not offer a comprehensive theory of the structural role of intellectuals in modern societies.⁵⁶

Other Marxists have developed themes related to specific aspects of the question of the intellectuals. Brecht's entire intellectual practice, for example, can be regarded as developing a multi-faceted aesthetico-philosophical meditation on the potentials for *eingreifendes Denken* [intervening thought] by a new type of intellectual engaged in a practice of dialectical pedagogy; Sartre, from a different perspective, saw the contradictions between the class origins of certain types of intellectuals and their ostensible commitment to truth as

⁵⁵ Cf., e.g., Bennett 1998, p. 62.

⁵⁶ Cf. Demirovic and Jehle 2004.

being resolved in practices of political commitment and solidarity; critical theory, in varying forms, from Adorno and Horkheimer to Marcuse to Habermas, posited the intellectual as the privileged site of critique and repository of the best elements of the Marxist tradition in an epoch dominated by the failure of the revolutionary project and the emergence of an increasingly totalitarian and repressive postwar society. No other theorist, however, whether consciously affiliated to the Marxist tradition or not, has offered such comprehensive theorisations of the question of the intellectuals as Gramsci, ranging from detailed historical analyses of their emergence and function in modern societies, their economic and political determinations and their relation to other social practices and categories. These are all united within not only a proposal for the future development of Marxist theory and politics, but a new definition of the historical determinateness and political efficacy of all philosophy and intellectual practice. The theme of the intellectuals is not merely one of Gramsci's numerous interdisciplinary fields of research, but a kaleidoscopic perspective onto the history-politics-philosophy nexus. Setting out from the role of the intellectuals in the 'life of the people', Gramsci progresses to a consideration of how they can assist in its transformation—but not before the intellectuals themselves have been transformed by that relationship.

9.2.2. A sociology of the Italian intellectuals

Behind the theme of the intellectuals in the *Prison Notebooks* is an extensive hinterland of cultural-political work during Gramsci's early years of socialist agitation. *L'Ordine Nuovo* was, in many respects, a paradigmatic experiment of young intellectuals who sought to redefine their relationship with the working class in active, paedagogical terms—a relationship in which they were more often the 'educated' than the 'educator'. The concluding formulations of *Some Aspects of the Southern Question* emphasised the role of the intellectuals in the combined and uneven development of the specificity of the Italian nation-state, particularly in terms of the foundations of contemporary hegemonic relations between South and North.⁵⁷ From the moment of his incarceration, Gramsci continued this line of research, intensifying its presuppositions and placing it at the forefront of his concerns. In the famous letter to Tania of 19

⁵⁷ Gramsci 1978, pp. 454–62 in particular.

March 1927 in which Gramsci confessed his desire to do something 'für ewig', he outlined his intention to pursue research, according to a pre-established plan, that could absorb his energies and 'centralise his interior life'. In first place was a 'research on the formation of the public spirit in Italy during the last century',

in other words, a study of Italian intellectuals, their origins, their groupings in accordance with cultural currents, and their various ways of thinking, etc. etc. A subject that is highly suggestive, which naturally I could only sketch in broad outline, considering the absolute impossibility of having at my disposal the immense volume of material that would be necessary. Do you remember my very hasty and quite superficial essay on southern Italy and on the importance of B. Croce? Well, I would like to develop in depth the thesis that I sketched out then, from a 'disinterested' 'für ewig' point of view.⁵⁸

'Formation of the groups of Italian intellectuals: development, attitudes [*atteggiamenti*]' is the third theme which Gramsci wrote in his first prison notebook on 8 February 1929. Significantly, it is immediately preceded by the theme, 'Development of the Italian bourgeoisie until 1870'.⁵⁹ In the early phases of his research, Gramsci continually returns to the theme of the intellectuals from various perspectives, including those derived from previous researches in the Marxist tradition into the inconsistency of degenerated 'ideologists' (Gramsci will refer to these all-too-common figures under the rubric of Lorianism).⁶⁰ Two perspectives, however, will be decisive for the development of the question of the intellectuals into the characterisation of the philosophy of praxis as an 'absolute humanism of history'. On the one hand, Gramsci early on develops a critique of the historical role (or rather, lack of it) of Italian intellectuals in the formation of the Italian nation-state. This analysis will issue in a

⁵⁸ Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 83.

⁵⁹ Gramsci unified the two themes in his abbreviated study list in a letter to Tania on 25 March 1929, 'Italian history in the nineteenth century, with special attention to the formation and development of intellectual groups' (Gramsci 1993, Volume 1, p. 257). In a further moment, on 7 September 1931, he extended his range: first, back to the role of the Renaissance humanists, and then, even further, to the emergence of modern 'intellectuality' from the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Church as the primary administrative and pedagogical institution in Western Europe (Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 67).

⁶⁰ Cf. Q 1, § 31; Q 28.

condemnation of the enduring cosmopolitanism of the Italian intellectuals and their failure to assist in forging a national-popular unity—the absence in the Italian *Risorgimento* of the ‘Jacobin moment’ that distinguished the French Revolution.⁶¹ In these early phases, Gramsci focuses in particular on the relationship between the Partito d’Azione and the ‘Moderates’. The latter’s powerful capacity for absorption of other intellectuals is analysed as an integral component of their capacity to exert hegemony (in the first note in which the famed term appears),⁶² thus initiating a line of research on Italian history in the perspective of understanding the historical conditions of possibility of the passive revolution that led to the emergence of Fascism.

On the other hand, these historical researches organically grow into formulations of a theoretical order, as Gramsci begins to develop what could be called a ‘sociology of the intellectuals’. In the first months of 1930, in the midst of a discussion of the political groupings of the *Risorgimento*, he announces the perspective that will shape all his considerations on the question of the intellectuals.

The term intellectual must be taken to mean not only those social strata who are traditionally termed intellectuals, but in general the whole social mass that performs functions of organisation in the broad sense: whether in the realm of production, culture or public administration: they correspond to the non-commissioned officers and to the lower ranks of officers in the army.⁶³

Here we have *in nuce* the theory that Gramsci will soon develop into the famed category of the ‘organic intellectual’. In the immediately following note, discussing the powerful ‘molecular’ attraction exerted by the intellectuals of the Moderates over the intellectual strata of subaltern social groups, Gramsci further specifies his perspective on the politically overdetermined constitution of the intellectuals. In so doing, he begins to sketch out a theory of ‘intellectuality’, or the terrain of intellectual practice, that will soon develop into a critique of the ‘traditional intellectual’.

Herein is revealed the truth of a criterion of historico-political research: there does not exist an independent class of intellectuals, but every class has its

⁶¹ Cf., e.g., Q 1, §43–4.

⁶² Q 1, §44.

⁶³ Q 1, §43.

intellectuals; however, the intellectuals of the historically progressive class exercise such a power of attraction that, in the final analysis, they end up by subordinating the intellectuals of the other classes and creating an environment of solidarity among all the intellectuals, with ties of a psychological (vanity, etc.) and often of a caste (technico-juridical, corporate) character.⁶⁴

The importance of this work for Gramsci's project is attested to by the fact that the theme of the intellectuals is one of the reasons he sought to reorganise his researches into thematic notebooks. On 22 February 1932, he wrote to Tania that

as for the notes I have jotted down on Italian intellectuals, I really don't know where to begin; they are scattered in a series of notebooks, mixed in with various other notes and I would first have to gather them all together so as to put them in order.⁶⁵

Significantly, one of the first thematic notebooks, Notebook Twelve, is dedicated directly to the question of the intellectuals, commencing with one of the longest notes that approaches something like an essay form. Equally, it is surely not coincidental that Gramsci undertakes this regroupment of material on the intellectuals in the same period that he declares that the philosophy of praxis is an 'absolute humanism of history',⁶⁶ in the late spring and summer of 1932. The 'expanded' definition of the intellectuals developed in the earlier notebooks here crystallises into the famous formulation that, just as 'all men are philosophers',⁶⁷ so 'all men are intellectuals'.⁶⁸ However, just as Gramsci continues to maintain a distinction between 'professional philosophers' (both for reasons of intensity and organisation of philosophical activity and their political efficacy in relation to the state), so he will also insist upon the social determinants that distinguish such 'everymen of modernity' and the 'non-commissioned officers' of fundamental social groups, because 'not all men have the function of the intellectuals in society'.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Q 1, §44.

⁶⁵ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 140–1.

⁶⁶ Q 11, §27.

⁶⁷ Q 8, §204; Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 323.

⁶⁸ Q 12, §1; *SPN*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

9.2.3. Intellectuals and the integral state

Gramsci's redefinition of the concept of the intellectuals and their social role is symptomatic of and can only be understood within his new theoretical problematic of the 'integral State'.⁷⁰ As we have seen,⁷¹ Gramsci's first significant move towards this resolution of the *aporiai* of Hegelian state theory and its Marxist critique occurs in a note written in October 1930.⁷² It is thus surely not merely coincidental that in November 1930 he places his discussion of the intellectuals in this new optic.

The intellectuals have the function of organising the social hegemony of a group and its domination at the level of the State, that is, the consensus given by the prestige of their function in the productive world and the apparatus of coercion for those groups which neither actively nor passively 'consent', or for those moments of crisis of command and of leadership in which spontaneous consent suffers a crisis. From this analysis there results a very large extension of the concept of the intellectuals, but only in this way does it seem to me to be possible to arrive at a concrete approximation to reality.⁷³

Equally, as Gramsci noted in a letter to Tania a little under a year later, his research into the intellectuals implies a concept of the state broader than a merely instrumental definition. This is particularly significant when we consider that some of the main intellectual currents of his day were moving in the direction of a governmental limitation of that concept, often through reference to the increasing importance of 'technical' forms of organisation overseen by, precisely, intellectuals. 'The research I have done on the intellectuals', he wrote on 7 September 1931,

is very broad and in fact I don't think that there are any books on this subject in Italy. Certainly there exists a great deal of scholarly material, but it is scattered in an infinite number of reviews and local historical archives. At any rate, I greatly amplify the idea of what an intellectual is and do not confine myself to the current notion that refers only to the pre-eminent intellectuals.

⁷⁰ Cf. Bucì-Glucksmann 1980, particularly pp. 19–118 and also Rottger 2004 for accounts of the 'integral State' that focus on the central role within it of the intellectuals.

⁷¹ Cf. Chapters Two and Five.

⁷² Q 4, §38.

⁷³ Q 4, §49.

My study also leads to certain definitions of the concept of the State that is usually understood as a political Society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus meant to hold the popular mass in accordance with the type of production and economy at a given moment) and not as a balance between the political Society and the civil Society (or the hegemony of a social group over the entire national society, exercised through the so-called private organizations, such as the Church, the unions, the schools etc.), and it is within the civil society that the intellectuals operate (Benedetto Croce, for example, is a sort of lay pope and he is a very effective instrument of hegemony even if from time to time he comes into conflict with this or that government, etc.).⁷⁴

Gramsci's suggestion that 'it is within civil society that the intellectuals operate' should be read in context (the reference to Croce indicates that the intellectuals he has in mind here are those that he elsewhere calls 'traditional'). As Q 4, §49 attests, the intellectuals also operate in political society, in an organising role that traverses the boundaries between political society and civil society. As the 'non-commissioned officers' of 'fundamental' social groups or classes, the intellectuals are thus mediating moments of transmission of a class's hegemonic project from one 'attribute' of the integral state to another, the agents of the condensation of social forces into political power.⁷⁵ They function not simply as constructors of the 'trenches' that characterise the complexity of a fully developed modern state-formation; with the seemingly 'non-political' organisation they undertake in the realm of civil society, they function as points of prestige and attraction for a class's hegemonic project and embody those trenches themselves, as 'functionaries' of the superstructures,⁷⁶ or 'agents' of the state in its integral sense as 'organised disequilibria'.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 67. On 3 August 1931, Gramsci had written to Tania that 'one of the arguments that has interested me more in these last years is that of fixing some characteristic aspects in the history of the Italian intellectuals. This interest was born on the one hand from the desire to deepen the concept of the state and on the other hand to understand better some aspects of the historical development of the Italian people' (Gramsci 1993, 2, p. 52). Sraffa encouraged Tania to inquire further into the matter; Gramsci's letter on 7 September reveals that he was quite conscious of this dialogue by relay and may well have formulated his reflections on the state specifically for Sraffa's eyes.

⁷⁵ Cf. Section 5.2.7.

⁷⁶ Q 12, §1.

⁷⁷ As with so many of his reflections on state theory, Gramsci derived this insight from a close reading of Hegel. The universal role assigned by Hegel to the 'organic intellectuals' of the nascent bourgeois state apparatus is read as a decisive moment of

9.2.4. Function of intellectuals

With the ‘question of the intellectuals’, Gramsci was intervening into a debate of the time that had a real political significance in the post-World-War I conjuncture. Not only Croce and Gentile, but also Benda, Sorel, Mosca, Pareto and Weber (to name only a few prominent examples) had studied the decisive and increasingly important role played by intellectuals in modern social formations.⁷⁸ Often, these thinkers (particularly those associated with a theory of élites) moved in the direction of arguing for a ‘relative autonomy’ of the intellectuals, conceived as a distinct social ‘layer’ or even ‘class’. The broader concept of the intellectuals within an ‘integral’ concept of the state had two important consequences that allowed Gramsci to intervene in these debates with a distinctive position. First, it permitted him to resist an economistically reductive analysis of the question of intellectuals based upon their class background (a tendency which has not been absent in certain traditions within Marxism, particularly those associated with its Stalinist and Maoist deformations). Rather, he comprehended the intellectuals on the basis of their actual function in the reigning relations of production and their political correlates.

[Gramsci] comprehended [the intellectuals] not primarily from the circuit of capital as a professional group or according to the measure of their self-image as great intellectual heroes, but rather, according to their organising function in the ensemble of social relations and division of labour.⁷⁹

Gramsci’s class analysis of the intellectuals was therefore of a fundamentally political nature: intellectuals may be determined, in the first instance, by their position in the relations of production (though in a highly mediated form), but

transition that founds modern political life—and in its turn forms the precondition for the elaboration, historical and not wilful or arbitrary, of modern (idealist) philosophy. *‘Intellectuals.* In the conception not only of politics [scientific], but in all the conception of cultural and spiritual life, the position assigned by Hegel to the intellectuals has had an enormous importance; it needs to be accurately studied. With Hegel one begins to think no longer according to castes or “estates”, but according to the “State”, the aristocracy of which are precisely the intellectuals. The “patrimonial” conception of the State (which is the way of thinking according to “castes”) is immediately the conception that Hegel has to destroy [...] Without this “valorisation” of the intellectuals by Hegel one doesn’t understand anything (historically) of modern idealism and of its social roots.’ (Q 8, §187.)

⁷⁸ Cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1980, pp. 47–54.

⁷⁹ Demirovic and Jehle 2004, pp. 1268–9.

their class position *qua* their social function as intellectuals is only realised to the extent to which they are 'organically' fused with the political aspirations of a class, rather than deduced from their class origins. He could propose this definition because he had already insisted upon a non-economistic definition of class in politically relational terms.

In truth: 1) the worker isn't specifically characterised by manual or instrumental labour [...] but by this labour in determinate conditions and in determinant social relations.⁸⁰

Similarly, Gramsci implicitly suggests, the intellectual should not be specifically characterised by intellectual labour, but by the position of this intellectual labour in determinate social relations (including political ones).

Second, with the emphasis upon social and political organisation rather than specific intellectual activity, Gramsci explicitly rejected a theory according to which intellectuals form an homogeneous social group distinct from social classes, or even an independent class. 'There does not exist an independent class of intellectuals, but every class has its intellectuals',⁸¹ as he had earlier argued.⁸²

The methodological error with the widest diffusion seems to me to be that of seeking this essential characteristic in the intrinsic features of the intellectual activity and not instead in the system of relations in which it (or the grouping which embodies it) is found in the general complex of social relations.⁸³

Rather than a horizontal relation between intellectuals across classes, Gramsci proposed a vertical organisation of intellectuals of varying ability and efficacy within classes, according to the previously quoted metaphor drawn from the ranks of military officers. This vertical relation extends across the (artificial) division between political society and civil society, so that there is a closer relation between intellectuals of the same class performing seemingly distinct

⁸⁰ Q 4, §49.

⁸¹ Q 1, §44.

⁸² Cf. also the following passage, from the immediately preceding note: 'In order to analyse the social functions of the intellectuals it is necessary to research and to examine their psychological attitude (or attachment [*atteggiamento*]) toward the great classes that they put in contact in different fields' (Q 1, §43).

⁸³ Q 4, §49.

functions, than there is between intellectuals of different classes engaged in only apparently similar activities. If a horizontal relationship predominated within the logic of the passive revolution, ‘an atmosphere of solidarity of all intellectuals’ such as emerged under the Moderates’ hegemony of intellectuality in the *Risorgimento*,⁸⁴ this was to be explained as a function of the hegemonic position of one class, subordinating and exerting influence on all other subaltern social layers, including their intellectuals.

9.3. Organic and traditional intellectuals

It is in the context of this multi-faceted analysis that the categories of the traditional and organic intellectuals receive their meaning. In both instances, Gramsci highlights the intimate relation between these figures and transformations of the mode of production, but, equally, stresses that they are subject to a decisive *political* mediation. Certainly,

every social group, born on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates at the same time organically one or more ranks of intellectuals.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, such organic intellectuals of the new class gain their ‘homogeneity and consciousness of their own function’—that is, become genuinely organic to the new class *qua* class—‘not only in the economic, but also in the social and political field’.⁸⁶ It is for this reason that the specificity of the organic intellectual is integrally linked to the specificity of the class project from which they emerge. There is not, that is, merely one type of ‘organic intellectual’; different class projects presuppose and imply different forms of organisation, which thus require different types of organic intellectuals, whose role it is to elaborate such organisation in both ideological and practical terms. ‘In the modern world’, Gramsci argues, and for the working-class movement,

⁸⁴ Q 1, §44.

⁸⁵ Q 12, §1; Q 4, §49; *SPN*, p. 5.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

technical education, implicitly related to industrial labour even of the most primitive type, forms the basis of the 'new intellectual': it is on this basis that one needs to work in order to develop the 'new intellectualism'. This was the line of 'Ordine Nuovo'.⁸⁷

Gramsci's specification of the role of these organic intellectuals establishes a paradigm of 'proletarian intellectuality' in even clearer terms.

The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, exterior and momentary mover of affections and passions, but in joining in actively in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanently active persuader' because not pure orator—and nevertheless superior to the abstract mathematical spirit; from technique-labour one attains to technique-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remains 'specialist' and does not become 'leader' (specialist + politician).⁸⁸

However, both the constitutively intellectual and political nature of these organic intellectuals' activity, *qua* intellectuals and *qua* organisers of their class, was obscured, according to Gramsci, by an already existing intellectual order.

But every 'essential' social group, emerging into history from the preceding economic structure and as an expression of its (i.e. this structure's) development, has found, at least up until now, pre-existing social categories which appear as representatives of an historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical transformations of social and political forms.⁸⁹

These 'traditional intellectuals' were, in fact, the organic intellectuals of a previously emergent and now consolidated and dominant social class, unwilling, at best, or, at worst, unable, to recognise their continuing political function. Gramsci's immediate reference was the situation of the intellectuals of the Catholic Church in Italy, seemingly independent of social classes, but originally organically linked to the large land-owning sections of the aristocracy.

⁸⁷ Q 4, §72. In Q 12, §3 (*SPN*, pp. 9–10), he adds regarding *L'Ordine Nuovo*: 'a weekly to develop certain forms of new intellectualism and to determine its new concepts, and this was not the least of the reasons for its success since such a conception corresponded to latent aspirations and conformed to the development of the real forms of life'.

⁸⁸ Q 12, §3; *SPN*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Q 12, §1; *SPN*, pp. 6–7.

Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals feel with an *'esprit de corps'* their uninterrupted historical continuity and their 'qualification', they posit themselves as autonomous and independent from the dominant social group.⁹⁰

More broadly, this 'feigned' relationship was also valid for those secular intellectuals who insisted upon their laical credentials. For example,

Croce in particular feels himself closely linked to Aristotle and Plato, but he does not conceal, on the other hand, his links with Senators Agnelli and Benni and it is precisely here that one can discern the most significant character of Croce's philosophy.⁹¹

Just as Gramsci specified the 'mode of being' of the new intellectual, so he argued that such 'organic intellectuals in traditional robes' in his own time engaged in a specific form of intellectual activity that, more than any particular content they pronounced, signalled their allegiances to a particular form of social organisation. The nature of a hegemonic project, that is, was reproduced within its functionaries, defining a terrain of intellectuality of which they were the *Träger*.

The traditional type of intellectual: the literary man, the philosopher, the poet. From this derives the vulgar journalist, who regards himself to be a literary man, philosopher, poet, believes himself to be the 'true' intellectual. [...] The lawyer, the professional, are the current types of intellectual, who believe themselves to be invested with great social dignity: their mode of being is 'eloquence' as the mover of emotions.⁹²

9.3.1. A powerful mechanism for conforming new forces

What were the intellectual conditions of possibility of these traditional intellectuals? How had such a division emerged inside the order of 'intellectuality' that resulted in one group of intellectuals projecting their own image, activities and priorities as those of the intellectuals *tout court*, to such an extent that it had become difficult even to recognise the organic intellectuals of an emerging

⁹⁰ Q 12, § 1; *SPN*, p. 7.

⁹¹ Q 12, § 1; *SPN*, p. 8.

⁹² Q 4, § 72.

but still subaltern social class as 'intellectuals' at all? How could this monopoly be broken, in order to reinforce the rise of the new organic intellectuals of the working class?

Answering these questions was a pressing political priority, for it was precisely this situation that new organic intellectuals of the workers' movement confronted in Gramsci's Italy, in a culture dominated—albeit sometimes unknowingly—by the paradigmatic traditional intellectual Benedetto Croce. Although in a highly mediated form, Croce's organisation of an intellectual order claiming its autonomy from immediate politics in fact played an important role in guaranteeing the continuance of the passive revolution of contemporary bourgeois hegemony. By means of their established prestige and consequent power of attraction for new initiatives, Croce's doctrines produced

perhaps the greatest quantity of 'gastric juices' to assist the process of digestion. Set in its historical context, the context of Italian history, Croce's work appears to be the most powerful mechanism for 'conforming' the new forces to its vital interests (not simply its immediate interests, but its future ones as well) that the dominant group possesses, and I think that the latter has a proper appreciation of his utility, superficial appearances notwithstanding.⁹³

Croce, that is, was not merely 'a great philosopher', his own strict division between ideology and philosophy notwithstanding; with his exemplary leadership of intellectual practice, he was a 'realiser of the passive revolution', a constructor of ideologies for governing others, whose capacity of absorption

⁹³ Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, p. 182. In another letter to Tania (25 April 1932), Gramsci argued that one of Croce's great merits as an ideologist and rhetorician was 'an attitude of serenity, composure, unperturbed assurance that we might call Goethean. While many people lose their head and grope among apocalyptic feelings of intellectual panic, Croce becomes a point of reference from which one can draw inner strength, due to his unshakeable certainty that metaphysically evil cannot prevail and that history is in essence rational. We must take into further account that to many people Croce's thought does not present itself as a philosophical system, massive and as such difficult to assimilate. It seems to me that Croce's greatest quality has always been this: to spread without pedantry his conception of the world through a whole series of brief writings in which philosophy offers itself immediately and is absorbed as good sense [*buon senso*] or *senso comune*. And so the solutions to many questions end up by being circulated and having become anonymous, find their way into the newspapers and everyday life, and so we have a great number of "Croceans" who do not know that they are and perhaps do not even know that Croce exists' (Gramsci 1993, Volume 2, pp. 166–7).

actively prevented others from attaining to that level of ‘distinction’ or ‘cleavage’ that was necessary for them to construct ideologies in order to govern themselves.⁹⁴

Gramsci recognised that Croce needed to be defeated, in the first instance, on his own terrain. At the level of philosophy, this involved opposing the ruling class’s restricted, speculative ‘owl of Minerva’ with a new conception of philosophy, posed in ‘realistic’ and ‘concrete historical’ terms capable of a wide diffusion among all subaltern layers: a ‘philosophy of praxis’. The elaboration of this philosophy in turn implied two tasks. First, it was necessary to subject to critique the philosophy ‘sedimented’ in *senso comune*, according to the dialectical relation between the two intellectual (non-) orders that Gramsci stabilises in Notebook Eleven (with his caveat that ‘the relation between “superior” philosophy and *senso comune* is secured by “politics”’).⁹⁵ Here, Croce’s ‘eloquence’ constituted one of the most powerful bridges or points of mediation for the diffusion of his class’s project among the subaltern classes. Second, it was essential to win the battle of ideas on the terrain established by such eloquence, for only by so doing could the working-class movement win over the ‘traditional’ intellectuals that the *Communist Manifesto* had already acknowledged as potential candidates for ideological conquest in a period of social transformation.⁹⁶

A new science proves its efficacy and vitality when it demonstrates that it is capable of confronting the great champions of the tendencies opposed to it and when it either resolves by its own means the vital questions which they have posed or demonstrates, in peremptory fashion, that these questions are false questions.⁹⁷

At the same time, however, Gramsci recognises that such a new philosophy, precisely in its capacity as a conception of the world, could not emerge by fiat.

⁹⁴ Cf. Frosini 2003, p. 56. ‘If the task of the intellectuals is that of determining and organising the cultural revolution, that is, to make culture adequate to the practical function, it is evident that the “crystallised” intellectuals are reactionaries’ (Q 8, § 171). This is one of the two notes in the *Prison Notebooks* in which the term, crucial for the ‘last’ Lenin, of ‘cultural revolution’ appears (the other is Q 17, § 1, in relation to the Renaissance). In a second draft (Q 11, 16), Gramsci replaces it with ‘moral and intellectual reform’, in a ‘realistic’ translation of Croce’s speculative vocabulary.

⁹⁵ Q 8, § 220.

⁹⁶ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 6, p. 494.

⁹⁷ Q 11, § 22; *SPN*, p. 433.

As a 'superstructure' within the integral state, it required practical constructors and organisers. In order to defeat Croce and his ilk intellectually, it would first be necessary to neutralise them *politically*, to demolish their trenches in civil society and cut their supply lines back to the terrain of intellectuality that guaranteed their continuing political efficacy. In other words, the condition of possibility of such a new popular *Weltanschauung* was the creation of a qualitatively new type of intellectual who would be both adequate to the specific tasks of the emerging class, and capable of exercising hegemony on the terrain of 'intellectuality' over and against the already established traditional intellectuals of the dominant class. Gramsci argued that

the assimilation and 'ideological' conquest of the traditional intellectuals [will be] quicker and more effective the more the given group simultaneously elaborates its own organic intellectuals.⁹⁸

The elaboration of these intellectuals, Gramsci repeatedly acknowledged,⁹⁹ would involve a long and tortuous process, both for reasons internal to the political development of the working-class movement in its totality and because of the power of attraction and incorporation exercised by the 'organic intellectuals of the passive revolution' through their dominance of the existing intellectual order. Structurally consigned to a subaltern position within the bourgeois state, the working-class movement's own distinctive group of intellectuals would be developed only insofar as the class as a whole struggled to emerge from its 'economic-corporative' phase and exercise genuine class-based hegemony in its own concrete hegemonic apparatus.¹⁰⁰

Were the new proletarian organic intellectuals therefore caught in a vicious circle, in the sense that their elaboration and diffusion presupposed the terrain of 'proletarian intellectuality' that could only be formed when they had first neutralised the terrain of 'bourgeois intellectuality' that frustrated their emergence? In order to respond to this challenge, Gramsci integrated another aspect of his research into the intellectuals that he had similarly pursued since the beginning of his incarceration: namely, an analysis of the historical origins of the humanist tradition and its continuing efficacy in contemporary Italy.

⁹⁸ Q 12, § 1; *SPN*, p. 10.

⁹⁹ Cf., e.g., Q 4, § 55.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Q 3, § 14; Q 25, § 5; *SPN*, pp. 52–4.

9.4. Renaissance humanism

From his earliest notes,¹⁰¹ Gramsci had traced the absence of a Jacobin moment in the Italian *Risorgimento* back to the particular model of intellectuality that had emerged in Renaissance humanism, whose ‘truth’ could in turn only be understood anti-genetically, in the effects that it produced in the subsequent tradition of Italian intellectuals.¹⁰² Opposed to all forms of transcendence, Gramsci acknowledged the great strengths and historical advances of the humanist tradition, particularly its attempt to posit a new image of man at the centre of the universe.¹⁰³ It is precisely in this popular-laical sense that Gramsci most often uses the term humanism, opposed to religious hierarchies and castes.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, however, he noted the limitations of this movement, which had remained within a corporative phase of historical development. The humanists had proposed to elaborate a new image of a ruling class while assiduously failing to elaborate the independent political culture at the level of a new state apparatus that could give this image a substantial popular basis.¹⁰⁵ As we have previously seen, this was particularly noticeable, symptomatically, in the humanists’ failure to institute a process of intellectual and moral reform at the paedagogical level.¹⁰⁶ It had remained merely a movement of a cultural elite. ‘The Italian medieval bourgeoisie’, Gramsci argued,

did not know how to exist from the corporative phase in order to enter into the political phase because it did not know completely how to liberate itself from the mediaeval-cosmopolitan conception represented by the Pope, the clergy and also by the lay intellectuals (Humanists), that is, it did not know how to create an autonomous State, but remained in the mediaeval, feudal and cosmopolitan framework.¹⁰⁷

In its turn, this ‘superstructural’ weakness, Gramsci claimed, was derived from the distinctive historical moment of the humanist tradition within the frus-

¹⁰¹ Cf. Q 1, §43–4.

¹⁰² ‘It seems to me that the question of what Humanism was can only be resolved in the context of a larger picture of the history of Italian intellectuals and their function in Europe’ (Q 5, §160).

¹⁰³ Cf. Q 17, §1; Gramsci 1985, p. 217.

¹⁰⁴ Cf., e.g., Q 11, §70; *SPN* 388.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Q 17, §1; Gramsci 1985, p. 217.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Section 8.4.

¹⁰⁷ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, p. 249.

trated emergence of the Italian social formation from the middle ages. Unlike the analysis proposed by Toffanin (whose *What Was Humanism?* Gramsci studied closely), Gramsci did not limit his analysis of humanism to the 'literary-cultural terrain', but

posited Humanism in connection with the economic and political facts that occurred in Italy at the same time: transition to the principalities [and] loss of bourgeois initiative and transformation of the bourgeoisie into landed proprietors. Humanism was a reactionary fact in the culture because the entire Italian society was becoming reactionary.¹⁰⁸

In short, Renaissance humanism had remained trapped within the 'economic-corporative phase of the State', that is, a period of weak development of the superstructures of 'civil society'. Confronted by the emergence of the Counter-Reformation, the humanist tradition quickly disintegrated, now confined to a subaltern role within the ruling order, as its spiritual supplement or 'Pharmakon', in the Derridean sense.¹⁰⁹

9.4.1. 'Renaissance' versus 'Reformation'

Gramsci further highlighted the weaknesses of this tradition by counterposing it to the more thoroughly popular experience of the Reformation.¹¹⁰ Occurring earlier, the (Italian) Renaissance had elaborated a sophisticated intellectual culture superior to that which accompanied the later (Germanic) Reformation, a more popular experience of spiritual and moral reform which only much later, in German idealism (and, ultimately, Gramsci suggested, in its transformation

¹⁰⁸ Q 7, §68.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Derrida 1981. Gramsci formulates the thought in these terms: 'in the period of the mediaeval communes [...] culture [...] remained a function of the Church, was precisely anti-economic in character (i.e. against the nascent capitalist economy); it was not directed towards giving hegemony to the new class, but rather to preventing the latter from acquiring it. Hence Humanism and the Renaissance were reactionary, because they signalled the defeat of the new class, the negation of the economic world which was proper to it' (Q 8, §185; *SPN*, p. 264).

¹¹⁰ Gramsci made an explicit comparison between the double opposition Renaissance-Risorgimento/Reformation-French Revolution on numerous occasions. Cf., for example, 'the Reformation is related to the Renaissance as the French Revolution is to the *Risorgimento*' (Q 3, §40). By choosing this theme, he was intervening on two fronts: first, the efficacy of rhetorics derived from the Renaissance and deployed in the *Risorgimento*; second, those 'recent philosophical discussions' in the Soviet Union discussed in Section 8.7.

in the Marxist tradition), had generated a comparably sophisticated higher intellectual order.¹¹¹ The Renaissance, however, for all of its strengths, had not been able to establish any organic relation with the masses, either before its heyday or after; when intellectuals formed in that tradition were confronted by the emergence of the Reformation, their attitude was one of detachment and incomprehension (Gramsci's continual reference was Erasmus's condemnation of Luther: "*ubicumque regnat lutheranismus, ibi literarum est interitus*").¹¹²

The humanists, whatever the legitimacy of their claims to have broken with the past in other respects, remained in this sense 'educated by their environment' rather than 'educator'. It was an attempt to produce a unifying reform within the ruling class that had failed precisely because it had remained the property of a restricted circle of that ruling class itself. They had indeed initiated a new intellectual culture; but this culture, cosmopolitan rather than integrated with national-popular life, remained the property of a restricted (albeit geographically diverse) circle. It was unable to forge links with or provide guidance for the initiatives of the popular classes on their respective national terrains. The subsequent reification and ideological reinforcement of these contradictions in the thought-forms of the bourgeois-humanist traditions, descending in Italy to Gramsci's own day and, arguably, to our own, was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the figure of the contemplative, detached scholar as the very model of intellectuality. Ineffectual in appearance, such a figure in fact exerted a profound force of neutralisation of intellectual activity, almost an incarnation of the molecular, individualising logic of disaggregation endemic to the passive revolution.

This was precisely the tradition of intellectuality continued, in a modified form, during the *Risorgimento* in the nineteenth century and by Croce in the early twentieth century. The relationship of these intellectuals to the masses necessarily remained 'bureaucratic' and 'formal'; they were structurally incapable of making the transition from knowledge [*sapere*] to comprehension [*comprendere*] to feeling [*sentire*], and vice versa; 'the intellectuals become a caste or priesthood (organic centralism)'.¹¹³ In effect, they were the 'specific intellectuals' of their own time, remaining on the terrain of 'technique' and

¹¹¹ Cf. Q 4, §3.

¹¹² Q 4, §3; Q 16, §9; *SPN*, p. 394.

¹¹³ Q 4, §33.

unable to progress to a political comprehension of their social function of leadership and organisation. Viewed in an historical perspective, Gramsci argued, these intellectuals were the modern inheritors, in a suitably laical form, of the relationship of merely formal unity between the intellectuals and the masses established by the Roman-Catholic Church: the intellectuals were seen as custodians of ideas (in this case, theology), enjoying the privilege of certain innovations within doctrinal limits, while the masses were denied any active participation in the social intellectual order, left in their condition of retarded development, superstition and prejudice.¹¹⁴ Viewed in this perspective, the tradition of humanism was a part of the problem rather than the solution. In what sense, then, could the philosophy of praxis therefore be characterised as an 'absolute humanism of history'?

9.4.2. Neo-humanism

Gramsci's positive appropriation of the term (subjected to a Gramscian transformation with the adjective 'absolute') arose from the fact that he detected another tradition that had emerged from the original co-ordinates of the humanist project, the corporative phase of the medieval Italian bourgeoisie. Defined by its untimeliness, or its solitude, this tradition centred for Gramsci on Machiavelli's attempt to theorise politics in its absence, or to think the conditions of possibility of a future politics which had overcome a merely corporatist and ultimately subaltern comprehension of its own practice.¹¹⁵ Machiavelli, according to Gramsci

expressed an original conception of the world, which could be called 'philosophy of praxis', or 'neo-humanism', in as much as it does not recognise transcendent or immanent (in the metaphysical sense) elements, but bases itself entirely on the concrete action of man, who, impelled by historical necessity, works and transforms reality.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Q 11, §12iii; *SPN*, p. 329.

¹¹⁵ On Gramsci's reading of Machiavelli more generally, cf. Althusser 1999, Frosini 2003, p. 162 et sqq. and Lahtinen 2009.

¹¹⁶ Q 5, §127; *SPN*, pp. 248–9. In Q 17, §18iii (*FSPN*, pp. 313–14) Gramsci notes his appropriation of the term 'neo-humanism' from *The Holy Family*. Cf. Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 4, pp. 125, 131, where Marx talks of 'real humanism'.

What was the decisive contribution of Machiavelli, thoroughgoing critic of the humanism of his time? Unlike his humanist antagonists, Machiavelli had not been content to propagate a speculative image of man at the centre of the universe that was then negated in practice. Rather, he had posited the 'concrete action of man' in the effective or 'actual' reality [*realtà effettuale*] as the real foundation of his thought. Not man in the abstract or generic essence, therefore, but man as a concrete ensemble of really existing social relations constituted the Florentine Secretary's point of departure. Machiavelli was not merely a 'learned man [*scienziato*]'; he was 'a partisan [*un uomo di parte*], of powerful passions, an active politician, who wants to create new relations of forces'.¹¹⁷ In the heart of the terrain of intellectuality that would later ossify into the figure of the traditional intellectual of the passive revolution, Gramsci has thus located a moment of immanent critique. This 'neo-humanism' set to work the principle that the main currents of humanism could only speculatively theorise: an absolute secularisation (to refer to the themes explored in the previous chapter), the positing of humans as they really *are* at the centre of *this* world. The moment of politics thus breaks the vicious circle by demonstrating the *necessary particularism or partiality* of a knowledge and intellectual practice that has dispensed with any 'transcendental elements' and bases itself entirely upon the 'concrete action' of 'man' in history. In Machiavelli, Gramsci finds the figure of the politician as a new type of intellectual who 'knows' the conjuncture on the basis of assessing the conditions necessary to intervene in it, actively and effectively.

9.5. *Philosophos sive politicus*

Does Gramsci's Machiavellian 'neo-humanism' or 'absolute humanism of history' therefore ultimately result in the equivalence of the intellectual or philosopher and the politician? Would the philosophy of praxis therefore be true, in a Stalinist reversal of Lenin's adage, because it is all-powerful, in the sense that the politician, immediately engaged in active relations of knowl-

¹¹⁷ Q 13, §16; *SPN*, p. 172.

edge, is thus authorised as an arbitrator of intellectual practice above 'merely' contemplative intellectuals?¹¹⁸ According to *Reading 'Capital'*, Gramsci's pre-emptive resolution of this problem carried a high and unforeseen cost.

A philosopher is, in the last instance, a 'politician'; for him, philosophy is the direct product (assuming all the 'necessary mediations') of the activity and experience of the masses, of politico-economic praxis: professional philosophers merely lend their voices and the forms of their discourse to this 'common sense' philosophy, which is already complete without them and speaks in historical praxis—they cannot change it substantially.¹¹⁹

If *philosophos sive politicus* resulted in a cancelling out of the former by the latter, this could only mean, according to Althusser, the political impotence of 'theoreticians' in the face of the 'politicians'. Once again, Althusser was reading Gramsci as his 'contemporary', ascribing positions to him that might indeed be made to follow 'formally' from his words but are not to be found in the *Prison Notebooks*. As we have seen, despite its condemnation as a rightist deviation, the early Althusser's 'theoreticism' in fact began as a leftist political strategy, seeking to mobilise theory 'from the base' against what he viewed (particularly in the PCF) as a bureaucratic recuperation of post-Stalinist reforms by the party leadership.

¹¹⁸ As recently re-proposed by G.M. Goshgarian in his introduction to *The Humanist Controversy*: 'The crux of Althusser's self-criticism of 1966 was that he had finally only inverted this schema, absorbing history in theory rather than the reverse, to produce what was, tendentially, another Marxist theory of absolute knowledge. Witness his treatment of the relation between philosophy and politics: the attempt to avoid the Gramscian conclusion (which, if for different reasons, was also Stalin's) that "the real philosopher is simply the politician" had ended up standing it on its head. "It is the bearers of theory", ran his ironic summary of the theoreticist tendency in his early work, "who make history"' (Goshgarian 2003, pp. xiv–xv).

¹¹⁹ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 134. In effect, this judgement amounts to the charge that Gramsci had 'spontaneously rediscovered' and valorised precisely those elements that *The German Ideology's* famous characterisation of the Hegelian philosopher condemned so vigorously. Marx and Engels argued that 'already in Hegel the Absolute Spirit of history has its material in the Mass and finds its appropriate expression only in philosophy. The philosopher, however, is only the organ through which the maker of history, the Absolute Spirit, arrives at self-consciousness—retrospectively after the movement has ended. The participation of the philosopher in history is reduced to this retrospective consciousness, for the real movement is accomplished by the Absolute Spirit unconsciously. Hence the philosopher appears on the scene *post festum*' (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 4, pp. 85–6). Ironically, the early Althusser did not pause

I argued and wrote that ‘theory is a practice’, and proposed the category of theoretical practice, a scandalous proposal in some people’s eyes. Now this thesis, like every thesis, has to be considered in terms of its effect in drawing a demarcation line, that is, in defining a position of opposition. Its first effect was, *in opposition to all forms of pragmatism*, to justify the thesis of the relative autonomy of theory and thus the right of Marxist theory not to be treated as a slave to tactical political decisions, but to be allowed to develop, in alliance with political and other practices, without betraying its own needs. But at the same time this thesis had another effect, *in opposition to the idealism of pure theory*, of stamping theory with the materialism of practice.¹²⁰

Althusser’s claims for the autonomy of theory, for its different times and protocols of validation, diverse from those which applied to other social practices, can thus be read, in part, as a ‘philosophical novel’ composed from the experiences of a struggle conducted from a subaltern position within his party, written in order to comprehend, clarify and sustain such a struggle. Viewed in this light, one of the central theses of high Althusserianism, provoking outcries and condemnations of its supposed intellectual élitism, can be regarded as a Sorelian ‘myth’, ‘for the tribe of the theoreticians’, in Gramsci’s apposite phrase.¹²¹ Just as the stories told by the popular classes in moments of defeat often take on a life of their own, transforming from narratives of solace and affirmation into foundational myths motivating future initiatives, so Althusser’s long struggle for the autonomy of theory and the right of criticism within the Party was translated into the very heart of his theoretical project as a substantive, positive thesis.¹²²

to consider that his alternative model ultimately posited theory as having a privileged access to the self-movement of the real, thus elevating the theoreticians of theoretical practice to the position of the Hegelian philosopher.

¹²⁰ Althusser 1976, p. 169.

¹²¹ Q 9, §63; *SPN*, p. 201.

¹²² To note such ‘political’ origins is not in any way to relativise or dismiss the theoretical structure elaborated by the early Althusser as mere fiction. The early Althusser’s notion of theoretical practice has its own ‘relative autonomy’ from its political over-determination, and should be assessed (also) on its own merits. Nevertheless, we should not forget, as Althusser noted in 1975, that a ‘philosophy does not make its appearance in the world as Minerva appeared to the society of Gods and men. It only exists in so far as it occupies a position, and it only occupies this position in so far as it has conquered it in the thick of an already occupied world’ (Althusser 1976, p. 165).

For the Althusser of the 'philosophy of the encounter', on the other hand, the philosopher's task becomes one of listening, casually eavesdropping on conversations, 'like Gorbachev in the streets of Moscow', where he 'comes to understand the true philosophy, the one that people have in their heads and that is always contradictory'.¹²³ From being the rigid guardian of the borders of the scientific, the theoretician becomes a porous transmitter or amplifier of what the earlier works had dismissed as the ideological. Augusto Illuminati has argued that in 'Althusser's image' of 'the materialist philosopher' we see 'almost an IWW activist who travels through America to trigger off strikes, hiding from the cops and beating the industrial centres and mine pits along the railway'.¹²⁴ If this is the case, then the impressionistic 'Portrait of the Materialist Philosopher', possibly the last text of Althusser's philosophical career, sketched at the fading of the day, would efface almost entirely even the outlines of the grand heroic portrait of the Althusserian noon of *For Marx* and *Reading 'Capital'*. Syndicalist revolutionary may be a more sympathetic figure than theoretician hierophant—but the unexpected end-result of this substitution would be precisely the feature that Althusser had imputed to Gramsci as an implicit denial of the contribution that the philosopher *qua* philosopher could make to the further development of Marxist theory. Marxist philosophers would merely lend 'their voices and the forms of their discourse to this "common sense" philosophy, which is already complete without them and speaks in historical praxis'.¹²⁵

9.5.1. The democratic philosopher

For Gramsci, on the other hand, the philosopher is a politician and the politician is a philosopher in the sense that both are actively engaged in constructing the 'terrains' (the 'superstructures' of civil and political society) from which *senso comune* emerges, albeit at different levels of mediation and with different degrees of specialisation. 'Professional' philosophers (that is, philosophers with the 'social function' of philosopher, active in the paedagogical institutions of the integral state) can indeed contribute to changing *senso comune*—

¹²³ Althusser 2006, p. 291.

¹²⁴ Illuminati 2005.

¹²⁵ Althusser and Balibar 1970, p. 134.

but only on condition that they recognise the extent to which *senso comune* already shapes their own philosophical practice. The distinction in *Reading 'Capital'* between the theoretical and ideological had precluded this from the outset. As Nemeth argues, 'Althusser forgets the historico-dialectical interaction between the philosopher's philosophy and common sense. The philosopher can and does change common sense'.¹²⁶ The form in which this philosopher changes *senso comune*, however, is not that of a correction. Rather, in keeping with Gramsci's view of the 'worldliness' of thought, it consists in making 'explicit', in elaborating 'coherently', the 'theoretical form' that is already 'implicit' in the 'practical form' of the historical action of the masses; or in other words, 'the naïve form of popular *senso comune*, that is, of the practical agents of historical transformations'.¹²⁷

In order to understand the nature of this type of intellectual activity, Gramsci proposes, building upon his study of Machiavelli, a new category: the 'democratic philosopher'.¹²⁸ This figure of the 'democratic philosopher' steps forward onto centre stage only once in the *Prison Notebooks* in the autumn of 1932, in the concluding paragraph of Q 10II, §44.¹²⁹ Its paradigmatic status for the type of 'proletarian intellectuality' of a combative workers' movement has often been eclipsed by a focus on the category of the 'organic intellectual', seemingly the genus to the species of the incidental and specialised notion of the 'democratic philosopher'. In one sense, the democratic philosopher can be regarded as an intensified version of the organic intellectual, its philosophical 'distillate'; viewed from another perspective, however, the democratic philosopher is the conceptual form that comprehends the political status of the

¹²⁶ Nemeth 1980, p. 94.

¹²⁷ Q 10II, §31; *FSPN*, p. 387.

¹²⁸ On the theme of the democratic philosopher, cf. Gerratana 1997, Fontana 1993, pp. 99–115, Fontana 2005 and Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 342 et sqq. Fontana argues that Gramsci's notion of the 'democratic philosopher and [...] his concept of hegemony is anticipated, and finds its theoretical and historical source, in the Machiavellian *vivere*. Political life represents the overcoming of the thought and practice of the feudal past, the creation of a new conception of the world that puts human beings at the center of the world and the world as their conscious creation' (Fontana 1993, p. 111). For Buci-Glucksmann, the 'democratic philosopher' is the logical outgrowth of Gramsci's critique of the traditional intellectual. 'If we are to overcome this dualism between the "philosopher" and the "non-philosopher," the intellectuals as depositories of the divine right of knowledge and the people, then the mode of existence of philosophy must change' (Buci-Glucksmann 1980, pp. 345–6).

¹²⁹ *SPN*, p. 350.

specifically 'intellectual' activities (that is, the techniques and 'instruments of thought') undertaken by the organic intellectuals of the working-class movement. In other words, the diversity of activities comprehended by the category of the organic intellectual undoubtedly distinguishes it as the more diffuse reality; the specificity of the democratic philosopher's mediation of thought and the reality of which it is a constitutive part signals the democratic philosopher as the more politically focused category. The figure of the democratic philosopher enables us to grasp the integral meaning of the 'organic intellectual' of proletarian hegemony and the terrain of proletarian intellectuality that it cultivates.

9.5.2. The democratic philosopher and *senso comune*

'Introduction to the Study of Philosophy' begins with reflections on the relationship between 'language [*linguaggio*], languages [*lingue*], *senso comune*'.¹³⁰ Although these may seem, at first glance, to be far away from the theme announced in the title, the connection between them in fact turns out to be a classic example of Gramsci's dialectical reasoning, or of what Gerratana has described as Gramsci's habitual method of 'narrating concepts'.¹³¹ 'Positing philosophy as a conception of the world', Gramsci argues, and conceiving of

philosophical activity no longer [...] (solely) as an 'individual' elaboration of concepts systematically coherent but also and above all as a cultural struggle to transform the popular 'mentality' and to diffuse the philosophical innovations that will demonstrate themselves to be 'historically true' to the extent that they become concretely, that is, historically and socially, universal, the question of language [*linguaggio*] and of languages [*lingue*] in the technical sense must be put in the first place.¹³²

Language (in the specific sense of the Italian *linguaggio*, or active socio-linguistic relations) functions in a certain sense as the concrete materiality of *senso comune* and thus also of the ideologies/philosophies, the active social relations of knowledge that unify and divide different social groups. Conceived in

¹³⁰ Q 10II, §44.

¹³¹ Gerratana 1997, p. 132.

¹³² Q 10II, §44; *SPN*, p. 348.

this 'instrumental' sense, as an 'apparatus' for the transmission and diffusion of knowledge, language becomes one of the primary fronts in the struggle between hegemonies, or the attempts of different social groups to concretise their class project in terms capable of providing direction to an entire society. To adopt a phrase from Althusser, it is the very 'materiality of ideology'. Struggles over meanings within language, its concrete deployment as social organisation in particular, is thus not secondary to the properly 'political'. Conceived in a certain sense, its capacity for unification and division becomes the paradigm or 'terrain' of the political itself.¹³³ Gramsci is thus led to argue that

from this one can deduce the importance of the 'cultural moment', even in practical (collective) activity: every historical act can only be performed by the 'collective man', and this presupposes the attainment of a 'cultural-social' unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills, with heterogeneous aims, weld themselves together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world (general and particular, operating in transitory bursts—in emotional ways—or permanently, where the intellectual base is so well rooted, assimilated and experienced that it can become passion). Since this is the way things happen, great importance is assumed by the general question of language, that is, the question of collectively attaining a single cultural 'climate'.¹³⁴

In a second move, Gramsci considers the perspective offered on such a problem by modern paedagogical theories that stress the active and reciprocal nature of the relation between teacher and student; that is, the 'dialectical pedagogy' of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. 'But the paedagogical relation cannot be limited to specifically "scholastic" relations', Gramsci argues. It

exists in all of society in its totality and for each individual with respect to other individuals, between intellectual and non-intellectual strata, between the governing and the governed, between elites and followers, between leaders and those led, between vanguards and bodies of the army. Every relation of 'hegemony' is necessarily a paedagogical relation and this is verified not

¹³³ Cf. Ives 2004a and 2004b.

¹³⁴ *Q* 10II, § 44; *SPN*, p. 349.

only inside a nation, between the different forces that compose it, but in the entire international and global field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations.¹³⁵

It is only after Gramsci has considered these perspectives that he then turns to consider a strictly 'philosophical' question, presenting it as logically following from his earlier reflections on the formation of a 'collective man'.

One could say therefore that the historical personality of an individual philosopher is also given by the active relationship that exists between him and the cultural environment he is proposing to modify. The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism, functioning as 'teacher'. This is why one of the most important demands that the modern intelligentsias have made in the political field has been that of the so-called 'freedom of thought and of the expression of thought' ('freedom of the press', 'freedom of association'). For the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is only realised where this political condition exists, and only then do we get the 'historical' realisation of a new type of philosopher, whom we could call a 'democratic philosopher' in the sense that he is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment. When the 'thinker' is content with his own thought, when he is 'subjectively', that is abstractly, free, that is when he nowadays becomes a joke. The unity of science and life is precisely an active unity, in which alone liberty of thought can be realised; it is a master-pupil relationship, one between the philosopher and the cultural environment in which he has to work and from which he can draw the necessary problems for formulation and resolution. In other words, it is the relationship between philosophy and history.¹³⁶

9.5.3. The democratic philosopher as Aeolian harp

The order of Gramsci's reasoning has led to a profound reformation of the figure of the philosopher, taking up 'the Engelsian theme of the end of the traditional philosopher, the elaborator of systems' and increasing its political

¹³⁵ Q 10II, §44; SPN, p. 350; FSPN, p. 157.

¹³⁶ Q 10II, §44; SPN, pp. 350–1.

determination.¹³⁷ One of the most sacred of the Western philosophical tradition since the religious invocations of Parmenides has been the claim of the 'distinction' of the philosopher, as the maximum expression of a separation from the mundanity embodied in *senso comune*. Plato's figure of Socrates is a prime case in point of the contradictions that have congealed in the notion of the philosopher as oracle of truth: though Socrates's conceptual breakthroughs come from an engagement with the discrepancies between different levels of social meaning, he himself feigns an ignorance of the preconditions of his activity. Mythological figures or vague intimations are invoked to justify what will later become an essentially contemplative and speculative attitude to reality. For this tradition, particularly as philosophy migrated after the collapse of the polis into the Epicurean figure of *ataraxía*, speculation becomes definitive of the philosopher as such. Philosophy's terrain is the freedom of the universal and conceptual, in opposition to the mundane necessity of the particular and sullenly instrumental. Nietzsche in his disdain is in this sense not the only modern inheritor of an ancient attitude that has haunted philosophy since its inception: a profound fear of the creativity of the 'semplici' or ordinary people, in Gramsci's terms, or the intellectual's suspicion of the non-intellectual's entrancement by the impure forms of reality.

Gramsci's figure of the democratic philosopher breaks definitively with this tradition. The philosopher convinced that his or her personality is not limited to the physical individual but is an active social relation of modification of the cultural environment confronts decisively different tasks—tasks that take place in everyday life rather than on the *Sonntag des Lebens* that Hegel, following Aristotle, saw as philosophy's social location. This philosopher is no longer defined in terms of separation from the 'life of the people', but as an expressive element of that life which it aims to cultivate, increasing its capacity for active relations of knowledge and practice. Like the completely new

¹³⁷ Buci-Glucksmann 1980, p. 342. The theme is not confined to Engels; Hegel himself had argued in the *Phenomenology* that the type of philosopher adequate to the modern world would be a more 'modest' type than that which preceded it. This argument in itself, however, is not adequate to grasp the redefinition of intellectuality of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, as demonstrated, on the one hand, by Hegel's diremption of the figure of the systematic philosopher into the intellectual engaged in the service of the state and, on the other, the dominance of 'bureaucratic' (rather than 'directive', to use Gramsci's distinction) conceptions of the intellectual in Marxism. By focusing more strongly on the philosopher's 'external' and 'functional' determinations (rather than the content of intellectual activity), Gramsci provides a salutary corrective against such tendencies.

way of practising philosophy itself that is the philosophy of praxis, such a new philosopher becomes possible only on the basis of an opening to the incoherence of *senso comune*, acknowledging the impulses and striving for coherence of *senso comune* to be the very precondition of philosophy itself. The philosopher thereby becomes an 'Aeolian harp', according to the romantic figure invoked by the young Marx: a sounding board that absorbs the cacophony of existing contradictions and attempts to 'tune' them or reorganise them into more harmonious forms.¹³⁸ As an historical experimenter in philosophy, as much educated as educator, the figure of the democratic philosopher represents the maximum concentration and intensification of the determining coordinates of a proletarian intellectuality capable of absorbing and providing direction to the experiences of its class.

9.5.4. The democratic philosopher as collectivity

That a personality is not limited to the physical individual but is an active social relation of modification of the cultural environment, an interpenetration and concentration of social relations in a determinate, particular individual, leads not only to a redefinition of the philosopher or the tasks of the intellectual. It also leads Gramsci, in a further anti-Platonic transposition, to redefine the nature of the collective bodies or institutions that are required for the extension of proletarian hegemony in a hegemonic apparatus. Its 'dialectical paedagogy' presupposes mass and active participation in the formation of democratic institutions. For this type of hegemonic relationship,

it is a question of life and death, not passive and indirect consent, but [consent] that is active and direct, the participation therefore of individuals, even if that provokes an appearance of disaggregation and of breakdown.¹³⁹

The hegemonic apparatus of the proletariat, that is, is modelled upon the 'Aeolian harp' that Gramsci had detected as the 'truth' of the philosopher, or the figure of the democratic philosopher who accepts and consciously works

¹³⁸ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 1, p. 491.

¹³⁹ Q 15, § 13.

to resolve the contradictions that has given rise to a specialised and separate figure of the philosopher. The philosophy of praxis, as the philosophical form adequate to such a hegemonic apparatus,

doesn't tend to leave the 'simple people' in their primitive philosophy of *senso comune*, but rather, it tends to conduct them to a superior conception of life. If it affirms the exigency of contact between the intellectuals and the simple people, it is not in order to limit scientific activity and in order to maintain a unity at a low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc that renders politically possible a mass intellectual progress and not only a progress of small intellectual groups.¹⁴⁰

For the intellectuals organically linked to this hegemonic project, it no longer suffices to make 'individual "original" discoveries'; rather, their role is much more one of becoming 'permanently active persuaders',¹⁴¹ engaged in demonstrating the capacity of the practices of proletarian hegemony to form the basis for a new society.¹⁴² These permanently active persuaders find their intellectual resources not in the 'perennial questions of philosophy', but precisely in their organic integration with the masses, in a reciprocal relationship of 'democratic pedagogy' in which those 'intellectuals' with the 'social function' of an intellectual are at least as often 'the educated' as 'the educators'. They are intellectuals who are 'organically the intellectuals of these masses', working out and making coherent the principles and problems which the masses have posed in their own practical activity. Far from the bureaucratic relation of the traditional intellectuals of the passive revolution, solidified in the bureaucratic institutions of bourgeois hegemony on both civil and political terrains, these intellectuals can only fulfil their tasks in an expansive institution traversed by the same principles that animate their own intellectual activity. Ends and means are rigorously implicated in a project of democratic expansion, or, as Gramsci wrote in the depths of the Third Period, 'in politics of the masses, to say the truth is a political necessity, precisely'.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Q 11, § 12iii; *SPN*, pp. 332–3.

¹⁴¹ Q 4, § 72; Q 12, § 3.

¹⁴² Q 11, § 12.

¹⁴³ Q 6, § 19.

9.6. The 'modern Prince' and apparatus of proletarian hegemony as 'philosophical fact'

Gramsci famously characterised this cultural and historical bloc, echoing Machiavelli, as a 'modern Prince',¹⁴⁴ or the fusion of a new type of political party and oppositional culture that would gather together intellectuals (organisers) and the masses in a new political and intellectual practice, 'organising the organisers'. Like Machiavelli's 'concrete "phantasy"',¹⁴⁵ the 'modern Prince' was posited as the non-existing element necessary to fill the constitutive lack of the present, in order to open it to the future. The political party, Gramsci argued, was the historically given form in which the decisive elements of organisation, unification and coordination had already begun to occur. Its re-elaboration into a non-bureaucratic instrument of proletarian hegemony, however, required an ongoing dialectical exchange with the popular initiatives from which the 'modern Prince' could emerge and into which it would seek to intervene.

The modern Prince, the myth-Prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can be only an organism, a social element in which the becoming concrete of a collective will, partially recognised and affirmed in action, has already begun. This organism is already given by historical development; it is the political party, the modern form in which the partial, collective wills that tend to become universal and total are gathered together.¹⁴⁶

Of all the themes explored in the *Prison Notebooks*, few are as little discussed today as Gramsci's theory of the working-class political party as an 'organisation of struggle'. The reasons for this relative silence on the institutions Gramsci described as 'historical experimenters' in the 'elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world', elaborators of new forms of 'integral and totalitarian intelligence [*intellettualità integrali e totalitarie*]' are various,¹⁴⁷ some more honourable than others. Yet the perspective Gramsci summarised in his theory of the political party and in the figure of the 'modern Prince', whether comprehended today under this name or various more recent euphemisms,

¹⁴⁴ Q 8, §21; Q 13, §1; *SPN*, pp. 125–33.

¹⁴⁵ Q 8, §21.

¹⁴⁶ Q 8, §21.

¹⁴⁷ Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 335.

cannot be avoided, as the point of departure and arrival of the *Prison Notebooks*. The 'modern Prince' for Gramsci, imprisoned for being a member of a Communist party, was a collective body constituted as an active social relation of knowledge and organisation, the 'active and effective expression' of the process of formation of a 'national-popular collective will' and 'intellectual and moral reform',¹⁴⁸ 'coherent and systematic actual conscience and precise and decisive will'.¹⁴⁹ It constituted a dialectical laboratory for experimentation in those forms of consciousness and methods of knowledge that would be necessary for the construction of a hegemonic apparatus of the subaltern classes, or rather, it was itself a necessary preliminary moment of such construction. It was the 'spirit of cleavage' in political terms, without which the subaltern classes would remain disaggregated in a merely corporative and non-directive civil society of their class antagonists. With this 'spirit of cleavage' alone could they begin to explore the forms of condensation of social forces into a political power 'of a completely different type' that would be adequate to the specificity of their hegemonic project. As an expansive form of dialectical pedagogy, the 'modern Prince' comprehended the active relation of the 'democratic philosopher' and diffused it on a mass scale; as a potentially mass institution of politico-gnoseological practice, it modified the relations of force within which philosophy could be undertaken, creating a new terrain of intellectuality; as a prefiguration of the 'new ideological terrain' of a proletarian hegemonic apparatus, the 'modern Prince' itself was a 'fact of knowledge, a philosophical fact'.¹⁵⁰

Just as its Machiavellian predecessor, Gramsci's 'modern Prince' remained no more than a proposal for the future, not a concrete reality, in his time—or in our own. Whatever the substantial differences between Gramsci's theoretical, political and cultural contexts and our own, his insights into the forms of a possible proletarian hegemony retain today their fertility for further theoretical and practical investigation, awaiting the energies and initiatives of a reviving working-class movement which alone will be able to confirm and, if necessary, to transform them in practice. Marxism's ongoing 'Gramscian moment' challenges us to take up his necessarily incomplete project: valorisation of existing

¹⁴⁸ Q 8, §21.

¹⁴⁹ Q 11, §12; *SPN*, p. 335.

¹⁵⁰ Q 10II, §12; *SPN*, pp. 365–6.

intellectual practices organic to the working-class movement, organisation of a new intellectual order, diffusion of practices of democratic paedagogy and construction of the institutional forms adequate to their expansion—in short, the elaboration of a philosophy of praxis that renews 'from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself'.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Q 4, §11; Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

Conclusion

Marxism and Philosophy: Today

This study began by arguing that the 'Gramscian moment' offers us the opportunity to repropose a distinctively Marxist philosophical research programme as a necessary element within the contemporary renewal of Marxism. Louis Althusser's critique of Gramsci's conception of philosophy and Perry Anderson's critique of Gramsci's concepts of the state and hegemony were identified as complementary positions which, taken in their unity and criticised according to the philological acquisitions of the recent season of Gramscian studies, lead us into the heart of Gramsci's thought. Having examined the political status of philosophy and the philosophical status of politics in the *Prison Notebooks*, it is now time to return to this initial thesis and to consider the capacity of Gramsci's treatment of the question of 'Marxism and philosophy' to help us to situate our contemporary efforts to inherit the Marxist tradition in the broadest sense of the term: as both continuation and transformation, fidelity and renewal.

Gramsci's proposal to develop Marxism as a philosophy of praxis emerged as a response to debates about the relationship between the workers' movement and philosophy that traversed the Second International and were intensified in the aftermath

of the Russian Revolution. The major proposals of the 1920s that determined much subsequent debate in the twentieth century regarding the nature of Marxist philosophy—namely, the interventions of Bukharin and Deborin in the Soviet Union, and those of Lukács and Korsch in the West—should not be regarded as isolated incidents of continuity with, revision of or departure from a supposedly unitary prior tradition. Rather, they were all attempts to inherit and to valorise specific elements of the older debates about the nature of the new *Weltanschauung* by means of a proposal regarding its philosophical status. The *Prison Notebooks* were ‘untimely meditations’ in this philosophical conjuncture, in a double sense. Not only were they ‘untimely’ in the sense that carceral isolation meant that Gramsci could not intervene directly in the debates of his day and was thus forced to develop his proposal ‘in solitudinous parallel’, in his own ‘necessarily incomplete’ dialogue. They were also ‘untimely’ in the sense that Gramsci, thanks to the philosophical richness of the Italian debate from Labriola onwards, provided a very different formulation of the question of Marxism and philosophy. In many respects, this position, arguably, responds more directly to our contemporary concerns than those of his ‘rivals’, precisely because the status of the question of Marxism and philosophy today is heavily overdetermined by the exhaustion of the last century’s opposition between a supposedly ‘orthodox’ and so-called ‘Western’ Marxism. In this sense, we encounter the *Prison Notebooks* today as a potential ‘future in the past’, a neglected moment of the twentieth century that may offer us a possible point of orientation for the twenty-first.

As we have seen, Gramsci argued that the Marxism of his time had been subject to a double revision: on the one hand, an ‘orthodox’ tendency that relapsed into metaphysical materialism; and on the other hand, an eclectic or syncretic tendency that combined Marx’s thought with various more-or-less idealist positions.¹ These two ‘revisions’, according to Gramsci, formulated the question of Marxism and philosophy in two very different but, paradoxically, intimately related ways. Indeed, we can now see that, throughout the debates of the twentieth century, while they sometimes entered into sharp contradiction with each other, their opposition was overdetermined by a secret alliance, the one playing the foil to the other.

¹ Cf. *Q* 3, §31; *Q* 16, §9; *SPN*, p. 390.

On the one hand, the 'orthodox' tendency defined Marxism as a 'new' theoretical system, equipped with its own foundational theses: whether these revolved around notions of 'materialism' rather than 'idealism', 'dialectics' rather than 'metaphysics', or even 'science' rather than 'philosophy', the result was to situate Marxism and philosophy on the same continuum, as comparable in their identity and/or distinction. This tendency posited, that is, a necessary relation between Marxism and philosophy, as rivals for the same status of a comprehensive thought-form. This was the approach taken, by and large, by the various formulations of Marxist 'orthodoxy' throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from some elements of Marx and Engels themselves and then, increasingly, in Kautsky to Plekhanov; in the form of Diamat, it eventually claimed the title of the official 'Marxist philosophy', before falling into disrepute along with the state apparatus for which it had acted as a 'philosophical underlabourer'. It was an approach shared, however, also by many perspectives that defined themselves (or were condemned) as 'heterodox'; what was at stake in these disputes was precisely the question of the particular type of continuity or negation of the philosophical tradition represented by Marxism, not their qualitative commensurability. In this perspective, Marxism 'replaced' philosophy as a 'queen of the sciences': to use the terms of Engels's *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Marxism 'inherited' the position of philosophy by negating and/or 'realising' it (an *Aufhebung*, in its various senses); in Labriola's terms, we could say that the *form* of 'traditional' philosophy was maintained, precisely in order to allow 'Marxism' to step forward as the new content animating it.

On the other hand, the syncretic tendency understood Marxism less as a series of novel philosophical propositions than as a unique 'combination' of previously given philosophical, scientific and cultural perspectives in a new socio-political movement. In this formulation, 'Marxism' and 'philosophy' were comprehended as fundamentally different registers. There could be agreement between them, under certain conditions and depending upon the different ways in which each formulated its claims, because there was neither necessary connection binding them together nor an essential opposition setting them apart. Their relation remained purely external and contingent. Seemingly opposed to the 'orthodox' perspective, Gramsci argued that this syncretic tendency (or, rather, 'ensemble of tendencies' loosely associated

by a 'family resemblance' consisting in a commonly desired patricide)² had, in fact, been determined by it, negatively; it merely rejected the dominant paradigm, on which it remained dependent for its own identity. The syncretism of this approach consisted in the proposition that Marxism could accommodate a variety of philosophical perspectives because it was not, in itself, 'philosophical' at all. Rather, it was limited to a political position or, at the most, a commitment to certain 'merely' scientific theses of the critique of political economy. No less than the orthodoxy, this approach accepted that the form of philosophy as it had developed in the modern tradition was to be maintained in the 'historical epoch' following on Marx's interventions. The socio-political movement known as 'Marxism' could only hope to enter into fruitful conjunctural alliances with particular philosophical positions, which remained, strictly speaking, inorganic to it.

In our own time, the distance between Marxism and philosophy would seem to have reached a maximum of mutual indifference, precisely as a direct reaction against the long dominance of variants of the orthodox tendency and the intellectual and political disasters to which they contributed. 'Post-Marxism' is, in this perspective, perhaps best understood as less a flight away from orthodox Marxism than as a new syncretism, an ensemble of tendencies united by their common need to deny an imagined orthodoxy in order to establish their own negative identity (and thus, of course, at the same time, perversely to maintain the image of 'orthodox Marxism', as its necessary specular opposite). The development of the Althusserian initiative perhaps provides the clearest and most succinct example of the transition from claims to orthodoxy to these new syncretic orientations. The Althusserian moment began in *Reading 'Capital'* with the attempt to elaborate the philosophy 'implicit', or 'present in a practical state', in Marx's *magnum opus*. The successful excavation of this philosophy, it was hoped, would provide the foundations for an alternative version of 'Marxist philosophy', one capable of challenging the failings of official Diamat, whose rhetorical terms and tropes Althusser nevertheless maintained. As we have previously noted, however, Althusser soon undertook a radical revision of these theses. Passing through various more political or even 'politician' positions, the late Althusser eventually declared that his 'aleatory materialism' or 'philosophy of the encounter' did not claim to be a substitute for official Marx-

² Ibid.

ist philosophy, or even to be a philosophy of Marxism. Rather, it aspired only to be a possible philosophy (or even ‘non-philosophy’) *for* Marxism in the period of its ‘crisis’.³

Radicalising the relationship between terms, Balibar has more recently and influentially argued that *‘there is no Marxist philosophy and there never will be’*.⁴ Balibar’s declaration is representative of the path taken by many of Althusser’s students, for whom the negation of Althusser’s early insistence upon ‘Marxism’ has not been accompanied by a similar rejection of Althusser’s consistent emphasis upon ‘the philosophical’. On the contrary, in a reversal of their teacher’s early pronouncements (and arguably at odds with at least some of his later meditations), it is precisely ‘philosophy’, even in its negation, that has constituted the focus of attention of much ‘post-Althusserianism’. In Balibar’s formulation, Marx himself remains crucially important *for* philosophy, as the elaborator of a position referred to as the ‘philosophy of Marx’, an *‘anti-philosophy’* or *‘non-philosophy’*.⁵ As Balibar makes clear, it is a relation to philosophy in many respects unprecedented, both ‘falling short’ of philosophy and ‘going beyond’ it.⁶ But we will be able to comprehend the distinctiveness of this relation only on condition that ‘Marxist philosophy’ and the ‘Marxism’ of which it constituted an integral element are acknowledged to be problems to be overcome.

The historical reasons for this self-imposed limitation are not difficult to discern, even if difficult to accept. In particular, the lack of nuance in the implicit definition of ‘Marxism’—silently asserted to be equivalent with the orthodox position whose historical failure is now finally self-evident even for its one-time proponents—justly continues to be fiercely contested by those who long ago rejected precisely such an equation. Yet the fact that Althusser’s and Balibar’s formulations succinctly encapsulate a perspective that goes far beyond those disillusioned by the failed ambitions of the original Althusserian moment indicate that we are dealing more with a representative formulation of a general ‘structure of feeling’ than with a merely idiosyncratic reaction. An explicit break with and repudiation of the dogmatism of ‘historically existing

³ Althusser 2006, p. 259; cf. Section 1.5.2.

⁴ Balibar 1995, p. 1.

⁵ Balibar 1995, p. 2.

⁶ Balibar 1995, p. 4.

“official” Marxism’ is regarded as the necessary precondition for any future for Marx, philosophical or otherwise, or the most productive elements of the broader Marxist tradition. Reference to Marx may have undergone a revival in the post-Cold-War world; as André Tosel notes, Marx now constitutes a central point of reference for some of the most vibrant of contemporary theoretical initiatives.⁷ The notion of ‘Marxism’, however, is regarded with greater suspicion. Marxism can perhaps only be maintained today—so the story goes—as an indication of a certain historical affiliation, perhaps as the residue of a political memory, or limited to the ‘critique of political economy’, comprehended in a technical and reductive sense. It does not have an expansive or positive role to play today, as the proposition of an autonomous philosophy or, in Gramsci’s sense, as a ‘conception of the world’.

Such an admirable wish to avoid dogmatism turns out, however, on further reflection, itself to involve a twofold dogmatic assertion, regarding both Marxism and philosophy. On the one hand, ‘Marxism’ is dogmatically reduced to the historical form of existence claimed for it by the Communist parties affiliated, more closely or loosely, to the former Soviet Union. Denied the possibility of what Benjamin described as a ‘rescuing critique [*rettende Kritik*]’ or what Raymond Williams named the process of a ‘selective tradition’, continuing reference to Marxism can only appear as a ‘residue of defeat’, a mere foil for contemporary ‘post-Marxisms’. Such a perspective fails to acknowledge that ‘Marxism’, the best efforts of Stalinist dogmatism notwithstanding, was never a monolithic formation writ in stone. Historically, it was a discursive field that was renewed in each period and reconstructed by the inheritance, contestation and transformation of generations of the working-class movement as both a theoretical research paradigm and as an ‘organisation of struggle’. The effort to inherit actively today a certain ‘spirit’ not only of Marx but also—to extend Derrida’s metaphor—of ‘Marxism’ would do well to insist that it has been precisely such a struggle that has always constituted the historical forms of existence of Marxism, as what Stathis Kouvelakis has efficaciously referred to with a Sorelian accent as a ‘scissile science’.⁸ The ‘thousand Marxisms’ invoked by Daniel Bensaïd, echoing Tosel, or the ‘plural Marxism’ proposed by Wolfgang Fritz Haug,

⁷ Tosel 2009, p. 11.

⁸ Cf. Kouvelakis 2008.

among other descriptions of the current state of Marxism, represent not memories of a unity whose loss is now complete, but the productive forms in which Marxism has in reality always existed and must necessarily exist today.⁹

On the other hand, the negation of a possible 'Marxist philosophy' radically different from that which once gained acceptance under this name and the accompanying claim that Marx himself nevertheless remains important 'for' philosophy contains a dogmatic assertion regarding the nature of philosophy itself. Marx's importance 'for philosophy' indicates both an external relationship and a confirmation; philosophy is an object to which Marx's thought relates in an affirmative fashion. There may have been conjunctural considerations in Balibar's original formulation in 1993, concerned to counter the widespread dismissal of Marx in a France still reeling from the anti-Marxist offensive of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the philosophical grammar employed risks transforming a defensive gesture into a self-defeating proposition. In this formulation, philosophy is posited as continuous with itself, whatever historical challenges it may have received in the past or will receive in the future—the 'turning-points' and 'displacements' of philosophy remain, precisely, *of* philosophy.¹⁰ Like Hegel's Spirit, philosophy demonstrates an ingenious capacity to include within itself even its exterior. We thus arrive quite rapidly at one of the most venerable illusions of the history of philosophy. In an inversion of *The German Ideology's* suggestion and Althusser's explicit claim that philosophy has 'no history',¹¹ philosophy, as a self-same subject, is asserted to possess a history of internal transformations and development—all of which, however, remain, in the last instance, recognisable as temporary embodiments of 'philosophy'. Marx, then, appears as merely one instance of philosophy's relationship to itself—which, of course, means that the notion of a non-metaphysical form of philosophical practice that both Labriola and Gramsci detected in Marx must necessarily appear as non-philosophical, important *for* philosophy but not *of* it. The dialectic between the orthodox and syncretic tendencies, and their secret alliance, here finds its maximum confirmation in the assertion of a purely external relationship between Marx and Marxism, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other, leaving both intact and unchanged by their encounter.

⁹ Cf. Bensaid 2002; Haug 1985–7.

¹⁰ Balibar 1995, p. 5.

¹¹ Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 5, p. 37; Althusser 1971a, p. 55.

The *Prison Notebooks* provide good reasons to suggest that these arguments are not adequate to grasp the distinctive nature of Marx's intervention on the *Kampfplatz* of philosophy, an intervention that fundamentally transformed the very concept and form of philosophy. As we have seen, Gramsci continually insists that Marx had introduced unprecedented perspectives into the history of Western philosophy. He was conscious, however, that this 'new' philosophy existed only 'in the practical state' in Marx's own works. Its systematic and coherent elaboration (coherent in both a logical and 'historicist' sense) remained a task for those willing to take up this incomplete project and to develop it further—both theoretically and practically. The *Theses on Feuerbach* provided Gramsci with the outlines of a radical philosophical research programme that he consistently pursued throughout the *Prison Notebooks*: Gramsci's critiques of metaphysics, speculation, subjectivism and objectivism, alongside his own positive proposals of historicism, immanence, humanism, coherence and *praxis*, can all be traced back to Marx's short text in which, in Engels's classic formulation, we can find 'deposited the brilliant germ of the new world outlook'.¹²

This study has argued that the 'Gramscian moment' of 1932 explored the themes of the *Theses on Feuerbach* by means of the concepts of 'absolute historicism', 'absolute immanence' and 'absolute humanism'. These concepts should be regarded as three 'attributes' of the constitutively incomplete project of the development of Marxism as a philosophy of praxis. Taken in their fertile and dynamic interaction, these three attributes can be considered as brief resumes for the elaboration of an autonomous research programme in Marxist philosophy today, as an intervention on the *Kampfplatz* of contemporary philosophy that attempts to inherit and to renew Marx's original critical and constructive gesture.

Absolute historicism: Gramsci's formulation of the philosophy of praxis as an 'absolute historicism' provides contemporary Marxism with the capacity to consider historically not only other thought-forms but also the nature of its own historical constitution and possible revitalisation. This poses the possibility of philosophical practice as a practice of the *rational translation* of philosophical and conceptual perspectives into the terms of the hegemonic organi-

¹² Marx and Engels 1975–2005, Volume 26, p. 520.

sation of social relations. The history of Marxism and Marxist philosophy itself must be subjected to such a translation, in terms of the development of the hegemonic project of the popular classes, in its successes, failures and new beginnings. Furthermore, Gramsci's dual critique of Croce's speculative orientation and Bukharin's relapse into a metaphysical materialism reminds us of the need to historicise the realm of conceptuality itself, in the form of an *alternative philosophical grammar*. In a period of the return to normativity and perhaps even to 'philosophy itself', an absolutely historicist perspective must insist upon the always practical nature of thought, as an instance of the active attempt to organise or to modify social activity as a whole; in other words, the relations of translatability between philosophy and politics, grasped as dialectical 'attributes' of the same historical process.

Absolute immanence: the notion of an anti-metaphysical *Diesseitigkeit* of thought provides contemporary Marxism with a valuable vantage point for engaging with the widespread reference to and valorisation of different concepts of 'immanence' in contemporary radical thought. Gramsci poses the problem of a concept of immanence that does not conceal new forms of transcendence as one of developing a *philology of relations of force*, that is, a study of the differential intensity, efficacy and specificity of social practices in their historical becoming. This perspective issues in a definition of thought as a moment of conceptual organisation immanent to determinate social relations, or in the sense that Gramsci detected in Marx's work, as 'theory'. Furthermore, Gramsci's insistence that the absolute immanence of the philosophy of praxis implies the possible production of the 'identity of theory and practice' proposes to analyse social relations of knowledge in terms of their *constitution of coherence*. The philosophy of practice seeks to render practice more coherent by deriving its problems from the striving for coherence of *senso comune*, precisely because it recognises in those strivings the conditions of its own 'coherent' constitution. As a dialectical pedagogy of mutual implication, the relationship between theory and practice is here conceived in immanent and productive terms.

Absolute humanism: the notion of the philosophy of praxis an 'absolute humanism' outlines a programme, following the *Theses on Feuerbach*, of analysing the subject or individual as an 'ensemble of historically determined social relations', or as a *Kampfplatz* of competing hegemonic relations. With his

anti-subjectivist notion of the constitutive social and political overdetermination of *la persona*, Gramsci provides contemporary Marxist philosophy with a valuable touchstone for the assessment of 'returns of the subject' and discussions of various forms of 'individuation' in philosophical debates today. Above all, however, the notion of 'absolute humanism' contains a critique not only of 'political philosophy' in a narrow sense but also of the political function of philosophy as such, as a *hegemonic apparatus*. Today, this notion invites us to reflect upon the institutional dimensions of contemporary philosophical practice and the ways in which, precisely as philosophy *qua* philosophy and even in its radical forms, it is integrated into and overdetermined by the bourgeois integral state, as a mechanism of conformism and condensation of social relations of organisation and comprehension into relations of speculative command. Gramsci's delineation of the figure of the 'democratic philosopher' provides us with the outlines of an alternative project that would develop philosophy as a dialectical-paedagogical relation of hegemony; in other words, the notion of a new form of philosophy as an element in the development of an alternative hegemonic apparatus of proletarian democracy.

In themselves, these perspectives provide valuable resources for critical interventions into contemporary philosophy, in both 'mainstream' and 'Marxist' debates. Their consistent deployment would demonstrate the extent to which the inheritance of at least a certain 'spirit of Marxism' has the capacity to engage productively with the present philosophical-intellectual conjuncture. Yet Gramsci also insisted that 'the originality' of the philosophy of praxis does not lie primarily in 'transcending of previous philosophies'; it consists 'also and above all in that it opens up a completely new road, renewing from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself'.¹³ It is for this reason, above all others, that the 'Gramscian moment' offers us the opportunity to repropose a distinctively Marxist philosophical research programme as a necessary element within the broader process of the renewal of Marxism; 'distinctively Marxist', that is, in the sense of a philosophical research programme that would be adequate to the renewal of a tradition that set out to rethink the very nature of philosophy. Gramsci argued that Marx's work represents a rupture with the prior philosophical tradition not merely at the level of individual

¹³ Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 464.

concepts or propositions, in terms of the elaboration of an alternative conceptuality, but also at the level of the definition of philosophy, or the nature of conceptuality as such. He did not limit his assessment of Marx, that is, to his role as the forger of new 'logical instruments of thought'.¹⁴ Marx, according to the *Prison Notebooks*, was not merely 'some philosophical "genius"' who discovered a 'new truth' that remained the property of 'small groups of intellectuals'.¹⁵ He was also, and above all, the 'creator of a *Weltanschauung*'¹⁶—of a very particular type.

Gramsci was well aware that it was not only Marx who had contributed to the formation and growth of the conception of the world known in his day as 'Marxism'; it was, rather, the 'form of a concrete social content',¹⁷ in which the struggles and hopes of the popular classes for a 'new civilisation' had historically been condensed. He could nevertheless insist that Marx had made a particular contribution to this project that signalled him out as the initiator of 'an historical epoch that will probably endure for centuries, that is, until the disappearance of political Society and the advent of regulated Society'.¹⁸ Beginning with the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx had provided resources that made it possible to grasp the dialectic between, on the one hand, professional philosophers and intellectuals in the broadest sense, conceived in terms of organisation and leadership, and, on the other, the activity of the subaltern classes, conceived in terms of the striving for coherence of *senso comune*. In other words, Marx had animated a conception of the world that had the potential to comprehend critically the conditions of its own activity as an instance of social practice, in the concrete process that led from 'knowing [*sapere*] to understanding [*comprendere*] to feeling [*sentire*]' and, crucially, 'vice versa, from feeling to understanding to knowing'.¹⁹ This dimension of Marxism distinguished it from all philosophy hitherto; no mere 'sociological' addition to a conceptual 'hard core', the recognition of the practical constitution of philosophy redefined it in terms of a social relation of 'dialectical paedagogy'. In all the 'impure' and sometimes even compromised forms that necessarily arose in the real historical process,

¹⁴ Q 11; cf. Section 3.4.1.

¹⁵ Q 11, § 12; SPN, p. 325.

¹⁶ Q 7, § 33.

¹⁷ Q 101, § 8; FSPN, pp. 347–8.

¹⁸ Q 7, § 33.

¹⁹ Q 11, § 67; SPN, p. 418.

the Marxist tradition had attempted to elevate this perspective into an organisational principle of philosophical and political practice. Inherited and developed further as a philosophy of praxis, Gramsci insisted, this spirit of Marxism, at least, had the potential to renew ‘from head to toe the whole way of conceiving philosophy itself’.

‘The philosophy of praxis’ Gramsci argued,

does not aim at the peaceful resolution of existing contradictions in history and society but is rather the very theory of these contradictions. It is not the instrument of government of the dominant groups in order to gain the consent of and exercise hegemony over the subaltern classes; it is the expression of these subaltern classes who want to educate themselves in the art of government and who have an interest in knowing all truths.²⁰

The central argument of the political theory developed in the *Prison Notebooks* is the proposition that politics can be repressed or ignored but not avoided. The supposedly ‘non-political’ of civil society, Gramsci argues, is itself a form of political organisation, overdetermined by the existing political society and strengthening the bourgeois integral state. Just as politics is a necessary moment in the elaboration of a social group’s or class’s project, if it will not remain confined to a merely corporative existence within the project of another class, so philosophy—or the elaboration of philosophy as a conception of the world, conceived as an ensemble of concepts or social relations of knowledge for grasping and transforming ‘reality’ collectively²¹—also constitutes an ineludible moment in the formation and striving for coherence of a social group. If the subaltern classes do not elaborate their own hegemonic apparatus capable of challenging the relations of force condensed in the established ‘political society’ of the bourgeois integral state, they will remain subaltern to its overdeterminations. Similarly, without the elaboration of its own philosophy, or concrete conception of the world elaborated in institutions adequate to the specificity of its own project, the movement of the oppressed and exploited classes of capitalist society will remain subaltern to the existing dominant ‘conception of the world’. The elaboration of such an ‘alternative conception of the world’, or the practice of ‘another philosophy’ capable of

²⁰ Q 10II, §41xii; *FSPN*, pp. 395–6.

²¹ Q 7, §25.

refounding the form of philosophy itself, remains an urgent concrete political task in the struggle to build a movement against capitalist exploitation and domination. The renewal of the 'Gramscian moment' today must ultimately be practised as a critical intervention into the revitalisation of a Marxism that strives to become such an 'alternative conception of the world', a self-reflexive and dynamic movement capable of vivifying a new and 'integral civilisation'.²²

²² Q 11, §27; *SPN*, p. 462.

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